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どうでもいい世界なんて2
—クオリディア・コード—
GAGAGA

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Doudemo ii Sekai Nante -Qualidea Code-
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釣瓶朝慶
おはぎ・ぼたもち
華蓮岡ケ神
こうがおかれんげ

だから――。
あなたは自分の意志で選んだのだから、最後まで責任を持ちなさい。
ベルセリア〈軍歌〉の未来を決めるのは、私たちの意志。
最悪な事態をこうむらないよう、
全力を尽くすことね。

Chapter 1: An Unnecessary Meeting

Part 1

The wind began to pick up once morning came around, and off in the distance, the thunderous roar of the waves continued to echo across the land. The area was quite calm yesterday, but today was clearly a different story.

Yesterday, the wind blew just strong enough to gently tousle her long, black hair, and the waves only popped up for a mere second before quickly dispersing back into the ocean. The scenery wasn't anything special, however… It was just the events that were unforgettable.

"I see…" she had said softly. "Well, there's no helping it, isn't there?"

She giggled awkwardly. The wind seemed to pause at that very moment, and the ocean became completely still. Even so, her words were probably as empty as the sky above her.

I continued to recall yesterday's events while nonchalantly preparing myself for work by taking off my pajamas, putting on the funeral attire they called a uniform, and trying my best to comb down the fuzzy hair that ran in the family. Once I was finished, I left my small but pleasant one bedroom one bath apartment, only to be greeted by the humidity in the air. There was a dark overcast, though it wasn't raining just yet.

It was just a short walk to the office, and once there, I glanced up at the sky. It looked to be a gloomy day today, and the weather might get a bit rough. It'd be nice if I could go home before it started to rain, but that might be hard to do with the amount of work on my plate. On second thought, ever since I transferred to the manufacturing branch, I couldn't remember a single time where I had gone home on time. Even worse, the system didn't record my overtime hours at all…

The mark engraved on the back of my neck served not only as a way to materialize my [World], but also as a personal ID. Because of that, the system could keep track of when I entered and left the office, just like having a timecard on me at all times.

Being in research and development, I was first and foremost occupied with developing new products, but also had to secure new markets for those products, and figure out how to transport them to wherever they were needed. With all this in mind, along with the fact that we had to keep up our growth, it was clear why I had to work late.

Logging overtime hours was quite archaic since it was all done by hand. Managers would go through the paperwork and manually approve the hours. The maximum allowed overtime hours per month was sixty, so any application that logged more than that risked getting rejected.

Because that was the case, every day after normal work hours I would have to write "Going home, NR (Not returning)" on the whiteboard and check

out. So, on paper I would be done with work, but of course there were a myriad of other tasks I had to do before I could actually relax. Some days I would have to drop by a few businesses, while other days I would have to work at home with my tablet, or even at a diner while eating dinner.

In the olden days these types of companies that overworked their employees like this would be labelled *black*, and apparently there were cries to change the entire system for the better. However, the bits of information I could gather from different preserved documents indicated that this *black* term for describing companies only came to use since the early 2000s.

Before then, it seemed that working long hours under strenuous conditions was actually something to be proud of. The people who did so were called office warriors, constantly pushing themselves in a concrete jail known as an office to work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Each year they would take exactly zero vacation days, so they might as well have been working in their sleep, too. *Passion, drive*… these were words that were constantly thrown around to show that working wasn't supposed to be done for the money.

Supposedly, it was a citizen's duty to work. They were forced to accept that just a *thanks* for the work they've done was normal, and that somehow they could get stronger through empty words of praise. This ideology was pushed onto everyone with an emphasis on conformity, and a result, people would be brainwashed to become these office warriors and ultimately be exploited.

With conditions like these, there were many people who questioned this lifestyle. They would go, "Man, I'm completely drained… I only slept for three hours," but ended with, "but I love to work. Plus, this is work worth doing…" and would just constantly repeat the latter half of that sentence to force themselves to live on. They were looked down upon by society, who very often blamed the new generation for slacking off and being much lazier than the previous.

Despite that, it was people like them who gave birth to the notion of a *black* company. Change was coming as they struggled to get their voice out. Having no voice in society was equivalent to wielding no weapon in battle, but once they were successful in having a voice, they slowly influenced the part of the society that once shunned them out. Through words like "Karōshi," meaning death from overworking, they were able to show that their way of life was not normal.

However, in the end, words were just words. It was hard to tell the extent of their impact, because many of the records that detailed these events were lost during the great calamity. No one knows whether or not they managed to change *black* companies for the better. Though, by looking at my dreadful situation many years later, perhaps they never managed to do it. It seemed that society couldn't change from just a few words.

That's why I could wholeheartedly say that words by themselves hold no meaning at all. Just like my time sheet that didn't accurately reflect my

work hours, like the title of the business roadmaps I have yet to write, or even like the many shallow statements I've heard, words were meaningless. In other words, it wasn't the words of Asagao Tsurube, Megu Natsume, or Renge Tsutsujigaoka that held any real significance, but rather what their positions stood for. Even if any of their empty words actually came true, no one would question their real intentions, since it really didn't matter to them. It was just unnecessary to do so, and above everything else, nobody really cared. To them, society consisted only of what they could physically see and touch as well as those empty, meaningless words, not ulterior motives that lingered behind them.

Those people never really experienced any significant change so far in their lives. They only know of the battlefield, and had grown accustomed to the status quo. Of course, that includes me as well.

So, as per the status quo, today we go to work. It's not like we know any other way of living.

—

The moment I stepped into the office, the system recorded the code imprinted on the back of my neck, and my start time of 8:50 AM popped up in a display. The standard start time was at 9 AM, so I, along with everyone else in the manufacturing branch, always started work at around the same time.

The office was the same as ever. Like always, there were some people who came in early to finish up the work that had piled up from the past few days. Even so, the entire office was deathly quiet. It was so quiet that even a cough would feel disruptive to its overall atmosphere. Furthermore, the place was relatively dim as well, compared to the bright morning sun outside.

Yesterday's fruit party was chaotic, but the energy from that had long died down. Despite having had a breakthrough presentation, by now everyone was back to normal, working like they've done for seemingly all their lives. The fact that nothing had changed even after what happened yesterday was unnatural, but understandable. Because everyone's situation became quite stressful, their first instinct was to deny that anything had changed. By not letting their minds wander off, they desperately clung to the everyday life they knew all too well.

As a result, I too acted like nothing had changed.

"Good morning," I said with a volume loud enough to be heard, yet soft enough as to not disrupt anyone working.

"Oh. You're finally here," replied Urushibara. He sounded irritated with his low, coarse voice and was restlessly fidgeting with his touchpad. It's how he always is though, with him wearing his black jacket and his tieless popped collar.

How nice of him to be the only one to answer me...

His voice sounded much lower than usual. Usually he'd say, "You should know that newcomers come thirty minutes before, right? Do you even have

any work to do? You should never have nothing to do,” and continue on with his long rants.
This time however, he couldn’t do his usual talk. His eyes, which clearly reflected his bad mood, kept darting at Asagao Tsurube off to the side. She was sitting in a separate desk, so every so often he would quickly look in that direction.
Usually Asagao would have her forehead exposed by tying up her front bangs, but this time she kept her bangs down enough that it was even touching her pink lips. She had dark bags over her eyes, and kept rubbing them as she frantically flipped through some documents, all while glaring at her monitor in front. She clearly hadn’t been getting much sleep. Even her breathing was a bit labored due to her fatigue, but that didn’t stop her from working.
It was painful for me to look at her work like that, but I understood why she did so. As the manager, she was desperately trying to make up the work that had stagnated in the past few days due to yesterday’s event. Surely she had some pride as a manager and as a person aiming to become the city head, but that in itself was a bit childish. Her current drive could also be seen as an escape from yesterday’s events.
The manufacturing branch had grown to where it was today because of what she had accomplished by herself, along with what she had been able to push the branch to do. This time, her desperate push to further reform the branch was not without mistakes, and despite that, she had to pretend everything was fine.
After all, she believed that she wouldn’t have any problems with her subordinates if she successfully performed her duty as a manager.
Unfortunately, after announcing her plan to go against the military branch, the fact that it ended up souring her relationship with both Asuha and me must have left a bad taste in her mouth. In her mind, it meant she had failed as a manager.
Well, I couldn’t speak for Asuha, but she really didn’t need to worry so much about me. I really didn’t care, anyway. I didn’t care that Natsume wanted to keep the current system with the military branch holding all the power… I didn’t care that Asagao wanted to knock that system down and reinstate it with one that was fairer to the other branches.
I just went along with Asagao because it seemed to suit my interests more, but honestly what I wanted to do had nothing to do with either of them.
“Umm… Asagao, how about some tea…?” Renge asked nervously. She held up a tray while standing at a distance as to not bother her.
“Thanks. Could you just leave it here?”
Asagao’s voice was weak and fragile. She didn’t even take her eyes off her monitor.
“Okay…”
Renge carefully set down the cup, but lingered her arm a bit longer after she set it down— she was probably thinking of what else to say to her.

Finding nothing else, perhaps due to the uncomfortable position she was in, she turned away and started to head back.
Her loafers made a sound as it hit the soft floor, while off in the distance, the sound of boiling water could be heard throughout the gloomy office.
“Renge, could you get me some tea too?” asked Urusihbara. He spoke softly, perhaps not wanting to dampen Renge’s mood even further.
“Ah, yes. Of course!”
Watami and some other people wanted tea as well, so Renge hurried back to get some more for them. After doing so, she even stopped by my desk.
“Kasumi, do you want some too?”
“Uhh… Sure.”
“Alright, here you go!”
I couldn’t help but notice her slender hands as she placed the steaming teacup onto my desk. Yesterday, those were the same hands that reached out to me… the same hands that I refused to take.
“You know, this is from herbs that I grew myself,” she continued. “It should have a relaxing effect on the body, I think…”
Renge wasn’t looking at me while she said that. Instead, she was peering at Asagao off in the distance.
“I-I see. Thanks.”
“Tell me what you think about it later,” she whispered with a voice so soft it practically tickled my ear. With that, she was off.
A slight breeze seemed to blow the tea’s steam right into my face, so I began to notice its fresh minty aroma. The tea’s light green color also seemed to go well with the white clay cup it was poured into.
Once I took a sip, I felt the tea slightly burn my tongue, but at the same time, its minty taste felt quite refreshing. It was weird to taste both hot and cold at the same time… I couldn’t say I liked that feeling very much.
“Huh…”
However, this was something I’m sure I’d grow to love. The aroma alone was enough to make me feel relaxed and right at home. My whole body loosened up, my thoughts drifted to a nice place, and I couldn’t help but think that this was really quite pleasant.
Well done, Renge.
I looked around to see whether the others liked it as well. Everyone, including Asagao, had the same white cup. I thought maybe later I’d ask what she thought of the tea, but she didn’t even touch it yet.
She continued to ignore the tea as it slowly got cold on her desk.
—
The awkward atmosphere in the office seemed to slow time down to a crawl — what felt like half a day was actually just one or two hours. After dealing with the mountain of order, commission, request, and all sorts of other forms on my desk, I was notified by my old work computer about an upcoming meeting.

I’m sure everyone in the team got that notification as well, since Urushibara suddenly stood up from his chair.
“Tsurube, it’s about time,” he said.
“O-Oh.”
Asagao frantically grabbed her tablet and a bunch of papers from her desk before standing up. It was easy to guess her current state of mind after seeing that listless response, so I knew that a meeting with her right now would not be beneficial to anyone. However, she called the meeting, so we had no choice but to comply.
Asagao and Urushibara went into the meeting room first, with Renge and I following soon after. Once we took our seats, Asagao anxiously looked through the papers.
“Well, let’s start with the reports…” she uttered out, clasping her hands to her chin. It looked like she was in prayer with her hands like that.
Hearing her, Urushibara pulled out a huge stack of paper. From the looks of it, there were at least twenty or so papers all bundled together. I’m sure he was well prepared for this meeting.
Seeing all those papers reminded me once again that there were people like Urushibara who overprepared for meetings. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry… even just reading all those papers would take a considerable amount of time. Besides, if everything could be written down, then there would be no need for a meeting in the first place. I wanted to point that out, but then he would go on his “Communication is important” rant, so I stayed quiet.
Besides, using PowerPoint was widely regarded as the better choice for that much material. People would even criticize you for not using it. I mean, it was undoubtedly a good tool, but seeing people swear by it was a little weird.
In any case, I’m sure there had been instances where people brought that much material for a meeting, but the meeting today was just a regularly scheduled one… it wasn’t anything special. The agenda consisted of just some trivial reports and other small tasks to be discussed. There was certainly no need to bring a fat stack of paper.
Meetings were originally used to agree upon a set of goals. There would be a clearly defined start and end time, and materials that needed to be discussed would be determined by the manager beforehand. However, Asagao was way too out of it. She had lost sight on what to focus on, so in the end, this meeting would be nothing more than some useless chatter. Not like this doesn’t happen all the time though, anyway.
If the meeting was going to pointless, I might as well give my report first, so I raised my hand and spoke.
“As the person in charge of the event, I will give my report.”
I kept my hand raised and waited for Urushibara to do something, but he just gave me a dirty look.
You should really stop doing that look… It really doesn’t look good on you.

Off to my side, Renge looked at me weirdly. I never went first, so this must have been quite the surprise for her.
Asagao, on the other hand, nodded slightly for me to continue, but she wasn't even looking at me. Instead, her eyes were fixated on her tablet.
This isn't the time for you to be looking at that, Asagao…
Right now, there were things we had to talk about.
"The event was a huge success financially. No other things to report from me."
It was brief, concise, and perhaps a little cruel. But it was the truth, and it had to be said.
"Success, huh?" said Asagao. She knew what I meant, but she sighed depressingly.
Urushibara and Renge did the same as well.
In terms of our financial interests, we came out way ahead. Despite that, we had other goals that we wanted to fulfill during the event— our financial interests weren't even our top priority. We prioritized announcing Asagao Tsurube's candidacy for city head, and garnering support for her behind the scenes to overthrow Megu Natsume, the current city subhead.
That was our main goal, but due to an unfortunate accident, we failed.
Asagao sighed once again as she played back yesterday's events in her head. Seeing this, Renge timidly raised her hand.
"A-Asagao, I'm so sorry," she said softly. "If I could only have stopped her back then…"
"No, it's not your fault," said Asagao, shaking her head. "I knew she was in in the vicinity…"
"But…"
"It's okay. For real."
Asagao smiled bleakly, but Renge was still down in the dumps as she hung her head down in shame.
I got the chills looking at them act this way. How could they talk so normally to each other like that? Because of Renge's costly mistake, Asagao's dreams and aspirations were pretty much dead in the water.
Renge also spouted some empty "let's change the world" words to me, words that were probably not truthful, but not a complete lie either.
Even so, Asagao and Renge acted like none of that had happened, but perhaps that was just how girls communicated. They avoided confrontation in order to keep their relationships clean and tension-free… or something like that.
As I thought, girls really are scary. I need your help for this, Asuha…
Asagao briefly stared at the ceiling with her eyes closed before hanging her head down towards the desk. She continued to speak, albeit in a whisper.
"We need to decide our future plans."
She spoke almost as if she was talking to herself, but since I was the first one to speak, I should be the first one to answer her.
"Yeah, we really should," I said. "What should we do from now on?"

Asagao bit her lip. Her eyes that were usually gleaming with enthusiasm were now dull and listless.
"… If we really want to go against Natsume, she's just going to take us down by force, and there's nothing we can do about that."
Her voice was as depressing as it could get, but she was not wrong. Going up against Natsume meant that things could get very dangerous, especially for her who was powerless in combat. Judging from her anxious expression and her slumped shoulders, it seemed she was well aware of the danger.
Noticing this, Renge lightly tapped her on the shoulder. "Ah, but at the very least me and Kasumi can be your guards…" she said.
"No way that'd work," I blurted out without thinking.
What are you saying, Renge?
Urushibara piped in as well. "We have to remember that she has all the elites," he said solemnly.
He was completely right. Making an enemy of Natsume meant making an enemy of the entire military branch. If that somehow happened, there would be no winning with the might of the entire military barreling down on us.
Besides, the whole reason Renge and I transferred out of the military in the first place was because we were both deemed unfit for combat. In other words, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that we were probably weaker than anyone currently in the military. Renge wasn't even a fighter… she was a scout, so she couldn't properly protect Asagao in combat.
All in all, there was absolutely no way we could take on the military in terms of brute strength. We should avoid any direct confrontations if possible.
"We could also just give this up," I said.
My words must have been quite a shock to Asagao because she suddenly looked back up and said, "Huh?"
"What are you saying, Chigusa, what the hell?" shouted Urushibara, standing up with his lips shaking in anger.
Did he feel compelled to act like this for Asagao?
"It might honestly be the best course of action," I said in a more serious tone. "Instead of completely going against Natsume and getting crushed, we could work with her and negotiate things that would benefit both of us. It'll be much easier to accomplish this goal, and if we do, we'd be at the very least left with some newfound political power…"
My explanation seemed to calm Urushibara down. "I see, that could work," he said. "They do need our resources and connections."
He spoke no more, opting to clasp his hands together in thought. In the brief moment of silence that followed, Renge spoke up.
"But…" she said in an almost whisper-like tone. She was still feeling down about the whole situation. "Will that really work?"
In reality, I didn't think it would work… not well, anyway. Even so, as long as we were still talking about it in this meeting, I had to make it work.

“It depends on how we approach them. I’m sure Natsume is hesitant on giving powers to branches outside the military and everything, because she might be seen as weak, but if we can get past that, we’d be… fine, I think…”
“Indeed,” agreed Urushibara. “Everything can go smoothly if we both negotiate something that maintains the status quo on the outside.”
Urushibara was well aware of the military’s hierarchal system. He knew what would happen if Natsume lost her grip on the military. It made me think about whether a hierarchal system might be necessary for doing business as well…
Renge gently shook her head. “Natsume is kind,” she said slowly, glancing down at the floor. She struggled to get her words out. “Kind enough to even remember me… That’s why I’m not so sure she can just go against her word to all those people more useful than me in the military branch… There’s a lot of them, right?”
Renge probably harbored these feelings because she had looked up to Natsume during her time in the military.
Natsume led by putting the better students in higher ranks. By determining each student’s merit, she could create a hierarchical system with her at the top. To break this system by silently giving us power would no doubt cause unrest within the military. Once that happened, the whole system she had put in place could crumble down. The issue was whether or not she would work with us until that happened.
We had to keep in mind that she was already ready for a fight. If that happened, we would lose everything.
“We don’t want to set a bad example for others, huh…”
I don’t want to hear that from you, Urushibara…
In any case, going against Natsume or working with her both had their advantages and disadvantages. Neither was the absolute right answer to all this, so all that was left was to wait for Asagao to decide what to do.
“Well, the fact that nothing’s happened yet could mean that Natsume’s overlooked our actions so far,” I said to Asagao. “It seems she’s yet to get serious about the whole thing.”
“Yeah, that’s right!” nodded Renge. “That’s why Asagao, you should be friends with Natsume! She’s truly a nice person.”
Asagao looked down at the ground. “Yeah, Natsume’s nice…” she whispered, but I’m sure she didn’t mean it. However, when she looked back up, she had a faint smile on her face. “Sorry for wasting your time,” she continued, “but I’m going to have to think about this some more…”
She rose from her chair, and Urushibara quickly did the same. Before walking out, she turned to us and said, “You two can go home now, actually. Well, only if your work is finished.”
“Uhh, isn’t that how it always is…”
Asagao didn’t pay any attention to my ramblings as she walked out with Urushibara right behind her.
If you’re going to say something, say anything other than that…

“What’s going to happen from now on?” Renge said to me after Asagao and Urushibara left the room. “Maybe Natsume’s actually mad right now… What do you think, Kasumi?”
Perhaps it was because she said that so unnaturally, but I was taken aback by her words.
“Umm… What are you trying to do?”
“Huh?”
“Well, remember when you said something about changing the world the other day?”
“What? Oh!! About that…” she said, slightly turning her head away from me and laughing awkwardly. “I did say there’s no helping it, right? So don’t worry about that…”
I listened to her silently, but once she seemed to be done talking, I came out with a question of my own.
“You sure?”
Renge smiled and timidly played with her hair a little bit.
“Uhh… It’s a little hard to say, but after meeting with Asagao just now I really am worried about her… I want her to be like she usually is! I-It really was my fault wasn’t it? I can’t help but think that she’s like this for my sake… I feel even worse now just saying all this! What should I say to her? I really need to get my shit together!”
Renge flailed her hand around wildly before slapping them onto her head in frustration. She then mumbled something incoherently in disarray.
I didn’t think there was much to get from her words. However, they did seem truthful and reflective of her current state of mind, so I was satisfied.
“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” I said. “For Renge’s sake… for the manufacturing branch’s sake… It’d be nice if we could get her back.”
“Yeah…” Renge closed her eyes and sighed deeply.
“That’s why we have to work hard too!” she continued. Her lips slowly formed into a smile. “Alright! In the meantime, I’m gonna go all out on work! Let’s do this!”
With her eyes now filled with determination, she fist pumped the air.

Part 2

The day had dragged on, but I was finally done with my work without going into overtime.
Actually, not exactly. Here in the manufacturing branch, there was no concept of work being “done.” The work just kept piling up, so there wasn’t really a way to finish everything. Looking at all the work was like looking out into the vast ocean… it was just endless.
That’s what work is, after all. If I had to say something more accurately, it would be that today I finished enough work to not piss off Urushibara. The extra work I could have done in overtime would probably be piled onto Asagao’s monstrous backlog on her desk, but I still went home anyway. For some reason I was just exhausted… I certainly didn’t feel like working anymore.

I just wanted to take a bath and go to sleep. I'll deal with everything tomorrow… maybe I'll work even harder then!
Yeah, right.
I'm sure I'll do something productive tomorrow. I mean, even zombies could get stuff done, right?
I staggered back home, and when I went through my front door, a familiar voice called out to me.
"Woah, you're back home early," said Asuha. Like always, she was sprawled out on the sofa.
"In a normal work day it'd be considered late…" I muttered back. Well, she wasn't wrong, I guess. It's been a while since I had gone home before sundown.
Asuha didn't live with me, but she sure acted like she did.
"Why are you here today?" I asked. "You got something you need?"
"A bath."
I asked knowing she wasn't here for anything important, and sure enough, her answer confirmed my thoughts. I didn't know what she really meant with that, but whatever.
She always answered with something vague like a bath or reading manga. In any case, our conversation always ended with that. I'm fine with it, though.
"You sure like baths don't you…"
"What? You don't?" she said with a slight chuckle. "That's pretty disgusting, honestly."
I didn't mind her attitude too much, but sometimes I wish she was just a bit more humble.
Also, stop with that chuckling…
"Don't worry, I love baths…" I said jokingly, taking off my jacket and making my way to the bathroom. "It's what I looked forward to today too…"
"Huh? H-Hold on a sec…" Asuha's face blushed a little as she bolted straight up from the sofa. "You're not taking a bath now, are you?"
"Huh? What do you mean? It's disgusting if I don't take a bath, right?"
"Wait, wait, wait…" said Asuha. "I haven't even taken a bath yet… so you can't."
Huh? I can't? And why's that?
How could she say that with a straight face? Unlike her, I actually own the apartment, so she sure had some guts to say that.
"The bath water after you take a bath is a no go," she said. "You never know what's floating in it."
"How about you just don't come anymore…"
Of course, her dorm also had a bath. Unfortunately, I had never seen it in person, but from the pamphlets I saw, her bath was beautiful and spacious. Even though it was shared with other people, it was miles beyond what I had here.

“Your bathroom is so grand, so luxurious, so there’s no reason to come all the way here for a bath, right? I said. “If you like baths so much, take one back at your place…”
Asuha scratched her head. “Ah, well, you don’t get much privacy there,” she muttered.
Our desire to do things alone must run in the family. I guess I could sympathize with her on that point.
“Well, since you’re living in a dorm, you might as well get used to a lack of privacy… Besides, it just means you have more chances to get along with others, right? Seeing that you’re not doing too hot on that.”
“I guess so…” She frowned. “But I really don’t know…”
She would usually snap back with a snarky comment like “Ewwww,” “Speak for yourself,” or even a “Are you serious?” but the fact that she didn’t was proof that she knew I was right.
“Besides,” she continued. “If you think about it, isn’t it weird to be naked around others?”
“S-Sure…”
What is she saying? This isn’t how she normally speaks… Is this person really Asuha? Or maybe she’s somehow learned to think more intelligently?
“Is it though? Is it really that embarrassing?” I continued.
“Yeah, it is…” her voice trailed off. Her face turned red, so she folded her arms together in an attempt to hide it. Once she did, her already wrinkled white blouse got even more wrinkled.

She kind of reminded me of Renge Tsutsujigaoka when she did that… I think it was the way she was acting. Somehow I struck a nerve with her.
“Asuha, it’s all good,” I said as I reached her shoulder. Seeing her reaction actually made me kind of happy. “Come take a bath here anytime.”
Despite my good intentions, she moved her shoulder away awkwardly. “Y-Yeah,” she said, scratching her face. “You don’t have to tell me that…”
“Just once in a while, okay?”
I needed some privacy too, after all. It could get troublesome if she was here all day, seeing that my place is pretty small.
“Well,” I continued. “Once you get into high school, you’ll have a room with a bath, anyway.”
When I was still in the military branch, I was given my own apartment. This privilege was given to all members of the military, and even if I had been kicked out, I still kept my place. Now, unlike me, Asuha was part of the military elite and was widely regarded as the next ace. There was no doubt in my mind that she would receive everything she had ever wanted.
That being said, she seemed to not have realized this yet.
Asuha’s eyes widened. “R-Really?” she said.
“Yeah, of course. I mean, maybe the system could change, who knows…”

Saying that was pretty useless in itself, but I wanted to throw in something about the election so maybe she could get more interested in it.
Asuha was pretty clueless. “System?” she said with a blank look on her face.
“You know, the city head could change, and so would everything else with it,” I said seriously. It may not look good for Asagao at the moment, but I’m sure she’d still have a go at it no matter what.
“Uh huh…” she said. Unfortunately, she didn’t sound interested at all. “So the city head could decide where we live, huh…”
“Well yeah, in all defense cities, everything is governed by the students, including housing and all that. You’re considered a future candidate for the city head, so you should at least know this kind of stuff…”
“Uhh… That’s not something I ever said I wanted to do, only something that Natsume and Asagao and whoever keeps saying… I don’t ever want to be the head.”
You should at least still know what the city head does, even if you aren’t interested in becoming one…
Asuha slapped the couch cushion a few times before hugging it tightly and slumping down on the couch once again.
“But still, if I’m the head, I can live in a big place, huh?”
“That’s not the point…” I mumbled. “How’d you even come to that?”
Well, she wasn’t wrong. If she somehow did become the city head, then I’m sure she would get the biggest house in the city. I didn’t want to tell her that, so I paused, unsure of what to say. In response, she looked at me suspiciously. Perhaps she had already figured it out, perhaps she didn’t. It was hard to tell.
“Well whatever,” she said, stretching both her arms out and getting up from the couch. “I’m gonna take a bath before the water gets all dirty.”
She quickly left for the bathroom, but soon peeked back out a moment later. “I’m hungry too,” she added on before disappearing into the bathroom once again.
“Alright hungry,” I grumbled, though I chuckled a bit at my own joke. My smile soon faded away however as I begrudgingly made myself to the kitchen.
It wasn’t long before I could hear some pleasant humming coming from the bathroom. It was nice to indulge in her selfishness every once in a while, but I knew this wouldn’t last forever. She was on track to become one of the highest ranking members in the military, so it was no surprise that she would eventually head inland and be thrusted into the center of this country.
On the other hand, I had been kicked from the front lines and was generally pretty useless, so there was no way I was on track to be by her side in the future. That’s why I’d keep enjoying her company no matter how she acted, until the time came where we could no longer be together.
I wouldn’t dare tell her that, however.

“Hey, you used my shampoo, didn’t you!” Asuha shouted. “Why’d you do that, are you serious? I need a new one ASAP!”
I did wish she would ask for things a bit more nicely… Hopefully, one day she would stop yelling from the bath.
—
There were a lot of things I disliked in life. Maybe it’s just because of how I was, but there’s really not a whole lot I could do to change it. Surprisingly, making food wasn’t one of them. I found myself rather making food than going through the trouble of going out or even just buying something to eat. It probably came from a habit I picked up when I was much younger. When I felt hungry, I would put on my homemade apron and just head straight to the fridge. It would only take a few seconds before I came up with a way to whip up a meal from just the ingredients I had. It was said that cooking was the embodiment of imagination, and I could definitely see why.
In my case, it’s more like I was making things from experience. Back in the day, I learned quite a bit just by watching my mom cook, and the cooking knowledge she passed down to me was still with me to this day.
I turned on the stove and started cutting up some carrots. Asuha soon walked in wearing her underwear.
“Stew again?” she said, wiping her damp hair with a towel.
Yes, stew again…
“If you got a problem with that,” I said, still cutting the carrots, “You can cook yourself.”
Also please put on some clothes…
“Huh? I’m not complaining man.”
As always, she spoke indifferently, but it’s true that she didn’t sound disappointed or anything. If anything, her eyes that were usually droopy were wide open for a change.
“I like your stew quite a bit, you know.”
“Oh wow, really?”
“Yeah, your stew. Just your stew.”
“Hey wait a minute,” I said. “What’s that supposed to mean?”
“I dunno.”
“You don’t know?”
“It’s whatever. I’m just saying, I like your stew,” she replied. “Enough that I’d even pay for it. Well, I won’t, actually, but you get the point.”
She picked up a spoon and quickly grabbed a scoop of the stew still in the pot. Luckily, it only took her one spoonful before she was completely satisfied.
I was instantly hit with a wave of nostalgia. Looking at her like this really brought out some of my childhood memories.
“You won’t pay, huh?” I said with a chuckle. “But you know, what you just said… the person who came up with this recipe would say that pretty often. You know, stuff like, ‘this stew is restaurant quality!’ or ‘if it was in stores

it’d fly off the shelves!’ and of course, ‘It’s good enough that I wouldn’t mind paying for it, but I won’t…” stuff like that.”
“Huh…” replied Asuha. Once she was done using the towel, she lit a faint blue flame on her finger and started to dry her hair more by wrapping parts of her hair around it.
She seemed uninterested with usual her cold response. She started to leave, but suddenly turned around after a few steps.
“Who was that person?” she asked.
Oh, right. Speaking of which, I haven’t talked much to Asuha about her, huh. It is a depressing topic, though…
Even though our ages were just one year apart, she lost all memories of our parents the moment she awoke from the cold sleep. Cases like hers were far from rare— the Administration Bureau had explained that it was actually quite common to have negative side effects upon waking up.
At that time, I thought that was rough for her. Not remembering your parents was almost the same as never having them at all. Besides, it shouldn’t have been possible to have your childhood memories forcibly ripped away from you in the first place.
However, Asuha was no longer a child. Perhaps it was time to fill her in on her childhood. Perhaps she was mature enough to handle it.
I slowly set the knife down onto the table. “It was mom,” I said as I dumped the carrots into the pot. “This stew… yesterday’s curry… pretty much all my food came from recipes that she taught me.”
“Your mom, huh?” said Asuha. She extinguished the flame on her finger and started to fix up her hair.
She spoke coldly, almost as if she had nothing to do with the matter.
I looked at her straight in the face before answering. “Yeah,” I said, nodding, “Yours too.”
“I see…” she said blankly. Without thinking, she continued to fix up her hair.
“Well, maybe taught wasn’t the right word. It was more like she was drilling those recipes into me, you know? Maybe she was trying to teach me some discipline, maybe some life lessons, or maybe even helping me prepare for the real world… In any case, I sure did a ton of chores back then…”
It’s been too long since then… I’m not sure I remember most of it. I don’t consider myself to be good at remembering things, and this was one of the reasons why. Despite that, I cherished those very memories now, even though I thought nothing of them back then.
This time, I started cutting the potatoes until I noticed Asuha walking up to me.
“Did she… teach you anything else?” she asked.
“Yeah, she did. Laundry, cleaning, sewing, and lots of accounting… And for each chore, she would give me some money if I learned how to do it. She sure had a very capitalistic way of teaching things.”

Wait a second… Thinking about it now, wasn't she way too harsh? I'm sure I thought that too back in the day… Was she even trying to raise a child? Now I think about it, why did I even do any accounting in the first place? I remember just powering through all those piles of paperwork, but were they really chores?
I must have made a weird face because Asuha genuinely looked worried at my reaction, but soon her lips slightly formed into a grin.
Damn, that's actually so cute…
"Then," she said. "She must have been a scary… no, strict person, huh? Or was she nice?"
It was difficult to answer that because I felt like there wasn't a correct answer. I still vividly remembered my mom's cheerful smile and her black hair that seemed to mimic the night sky. I did feel nostalgic thinking back to my childhood, but at the same time, I also got the chills.
"Well… hard to say. She was like an angel and a demon…" I replied. I didn't know what to say, so I just said what had been on my mind ever since I was a child.
"Okay… What does that even mean— that's hilarious," said Asuha as she chuckled to herself. Her laugh was surprisingly open and pure.
"Yeah, it's hilarious alright. Thanks to that I can do most things pretty well now…" I pointed at the stew. "Well, this is pretty different compared to hers, though."
"Really?"
"Yeah, even though the ingredients are exactly the same. Maybe I'm just not good enough."
I continued to cut the potatoes, until I realized that it could just be that my tastes had changed over the years, and that's why the stew tasted a lot different than how I remembered it to be.
Asuha gently poked me from the side. "Hey, teach me how to make it too," she said.
"Err, don't worry about it. I'll make it so it's fine."
Also, please don't poke me when I'm handling the knife…
"That's not the point…"
"You don't need to worry about cooking or anything like that," I said. "It's not like you're gonna be a housewife anytime soon."
"Eww… what are you even saying," she scowled. "Seriously, why would you even say that? Fine, whatever. It's not like I wanted to learn from you anyway, you creep me out way too much."
"Don't say that… It hurts me a little inside… But fine, I'll teach you everything you need to know. Everything. *Everything.*"
"Just the basics are fine!" shouted Asuha, tightening her shoulders. She angrily stormed out of the kitchen.
However, she stopped before completely leaving.
"I would have wanted to learn from mom too…" she whispered softly.

Her voice had turned really soft, but I was still able to hear her. It must have been hard for her to say that, seeing that her face, and even her ears, had turned red.
“Alright, you got it,” I said, but Asuha didn’t stick around to hear my reply. She had already gone back to the sofa.
I tossed up the onion I was holding in my hand while briefly thinking about my mother’s teaching methods.
Hmm…
I instinctively caught the onion and started to dice it like all the other ingredients.
Part 3
It was always nice to eat dinner as a family. Asuha seemed to be enjoying my cooking—she was smacking her lips after every bite and just feeling happy in general.
I smiled. If only this could continue on forever…
Of course, I knew it could not. That’s why I continued to cherish the limited time I had left with my sister. I wouldn’t forgive myself if I held her back from doing greater things in life.
It wasn’t long before our blissful dinner came to an end. Once it did, I went to the kitchen to clean up, while Asuha lied down on the sofa once again.
“Hey, you know, if you got a bigger kitchen,” she muttered. “We could cook at the same time.”
“Huh? Yeah, I guess,” I replied. Luckily, I was still able to hear her while scrubbing the dishes under the running sink.
“Hmm, maybe I’ll go ask for it.”
“Ask who?”
“Natsume,” Asuha replied nonchalantly. “The other day she did ask me if I wanted anything.”
Her words put me at a full stop.
That was probably no big deal to Asuha, but it was something that I couldn’t overlook. The fact that Natsume asked her that led me to believe that she was willing to give special privileges to the top fighters. Perhaps she had already made a move in solidifying that kind of system, a system where the military elite had even more power and influence. By doing so, she would expand her already enormous sphere of influence within the city.
I’m sure Asuha wasn’t the only one she asked that to. If that was the case, then it looked pretty bad for our plan to negotiate with her, since it meant that she still considered us a threat. I’m sure she even kept a close eye on me, since I was a close associate of Asagao. Our whole branch was probably tightly under her radar.
So, I figured my work was going to get a lot more troublesome, even though I for sure wasn’t getting rewarded for it. I wasn’t even sure if I could manage it.
In the current system, there was a high chance I was just going to keep my current rank forever. In this city, trying to get points for anything non-

military related was extremely difficult. If I were to speak truthfully, then someone like me who was pretty much demoted from the military would end up nowhere near Asuha, who was expected to become the city head one day.
I knew that my time with Asuha would become even more limited if Natsume continued on with her agenda. There was only one way left to counteract it— I was going to have to completely break the current system. The only way I could see that happening was if Asagao won the election. I would ride in her coattails after she successfully won the election.
If I wanted to continue being near Asuha's side, that was the only path I could take.
I turned off the sink and took off my apron.
"I'm gonna do a little work," I said, grabbing my jacket.
"Huh? But it's nighttime…"
"I'm going *because* it's nighttime."
"What? What are you talking about?"
"It's just work as usual."
"What's usual about that?" said Asuha. She was still laid out on the sofa, but she did eye me suspiciously.
In return, I gave her a smile and waved her goodbye. "Just be sure to lock the door when you go home, okay?"
"Yeah, sure. Err actually, I'm just gonna head back now…" she said as she got up from the sofa. She was probably feeling a bit of a food coma.
Together, the two of us left the room and headed out. We walked a good distance from my apartment before I finally spoke up.
"Umm," I said. "Asuha… why are you coming with me?"
"I'm just taking a bit of a walk," she replied with her eyes darting all over the place.
She spoke the most obvious of lies… Perhaps talking about our mother made her yearn for home.
"Oh, okay…" I replied calmly. I didn't want to make a big deal out of it, so I didn't bother saying anything else. Besides, she was acting really cute.
Normally I'd be completely down to indulge in her selfishness, but at this point I couldn't delay my work any longer. If I were to continue to be with Asuha, then I had to do everything I could to help Asagao win the election. I couldn't even let one minute go to waste.
Because if I didn't try my hardest now, I knew I would regret it until the day I died.
—
The sky continued to be cloudy well into the night, so it was hard to see anything at all. However, the wind soon picked up and pushed the clouds away, revealing the starry sky above.
The world might have changed over the years, but the night sky certainly hadn't. I honestly didn't realize this until now, because normally on my way home, I'd be too exhausted to do anything but walk with my eyes glued to

the ground. With so much work in my hands, there just wasn't any time to look up.
It had been a while since I was able to just leisurely walk to the office. Normally, I'd try to get there as fast as I could, but this time I was able to enjoy the moment because Asuha was by my side. Surprisingly, it was her who kept on eagerly walking ahead and looking back at me. I had never walked a dog before, but I'm sure it wouldn't have been too different than this.
Eventually we reached my office, a large building within the city.
"Alright, I'm off to do work," I said. "Take care on your way home."
"Okay," nodded Asuha.
I waved her goodbye and made my way into the building. Because the front entrance was completely locked, I had to enter the code in the back to get in. As I did, I noticed someone else behind me, so I turned around instinctively.
It was Asuha.
"Wow…" she said in amazement, curiously peering at the keypad.
"You aren't heading back?" I said, opening the door.
"Uhh…. Yeah, err…" she replied. "I'm still a bit free…"
"Oh."
It looked like she wanted to see more of my workplace… Sure, I was completely okay with that. I'd be nice if she actually came to visit me in the office once in a while, though…
If it wasn't for the emergency exit sign, the hallway would have been completely dark. Both Asuha and I made our way through the office, but she was close… too close.
"Umm, Asuha, it's hard to walk like this," I said.
Asuha was pulling on the back of my shirt, making it awkward for me to walk.
"Like what?" she replied as if she wasn't doing anything.
"Uhhh…"
"Hey, where are the lights?" she whispered into my ear.
"Well, to save money we have to turn off all the lights after hours. When I do overtime, I can only use the lights near me."
"What the hell is that rule?" she muttered, closing in on me. She got so close to the point where there wasn't any space between us and inched me forward a little. It was as if I was the horse, and she was the rider.
"Hey… you're walking too fast," she said. "You walk so fast it's almost disgusting."
"I'm just walking at a normal pace… And I'm not disgusting, okay?"
"Can you walk slower then…?" she said softly as she gripped my shirt tighter.
She was pulling hard, so I had no choice but to slow down. Even though the whole office was completely dark, I was able to move around freely because my [World] allowed me to see through sound alone. It also helped that I was

familiar with the layout of the office. As a result, I could even get around with my eyes closed.
I got to my research and development area without much trouble and went to turn on the light switch, but was suddenly interrupted by Asuha.
“H-Hey…”
Asuha suddenly jolted forward and wrapped her arms around me. She caught me by surprise— I didn’t know whether to feel happy or embarrassed. Well, I’m sure I was feeling more happy, but it was not the time to let her know that.
With us being so close together, I could feel Asuha’s body shaking a little bit. As I turned to see what was wrong, I saw that she was on the verge of tears, so I instinctively patted her on the head.
Asuha pointed to something in front of us. “W-What’s that…” she whispered.
There was a girl in front of us who was dimly lit by her monitor. Her hair was a complete mess— it was disheveled and uncombed. With her unusually pale skin and her red, puffy eyes, she looked quite sickly. She was angrily biting her lip, but her expression was actually quite sad. There’s no doubt about it… She was Asagao.
“Holy! You scared me!” she said after finally noticing me. “Oh, Kasumi, huh?”
Asagao lightly rubbed her eyes and took another good look at me. She probably never stopped working even after everyone had been long gone, and was so preoccupied that she didn’t bother turning on the light.
“It’s okay, Asuha,” I said, “It’s just Asagao.”
“Really?”
I pulled Asuha away from me and reached for the light switch. The room instantly got bright, and I was able to see Asagao, her desk, and her computer all at once.
Asuha breathed a sigh a relief. “F-Forehead girl…”
“What’s going on? Why’re you two here?” snapped Asagao. She gave us a cold stare.
“Work.”
I went to my desk with Asuha right behind me, and pulled out my chair for her while getting Urushibara’s chair for myself.
Once we got settled in, the three of us were completely silent, and the atmosphere turned pretty awkward in the room. The only noises came from my computer booting up and Asuha’s chair as she spun around in it.
What are you doing, Asuha? Are you bored already?
I didn’t know what Asagao was doing either, staying this late alone to work. Normally I wouldn’t care, but this time was different. She was my leader, the one who was going to grant my one and only wish, so I had to figure out what was going through her mind.
It would be troublesome for me if she was at a loss of what to do. I wouldn’t mind even if she gave up, because then there’s just not a whole lot I can do about it. I do mind, however, if she couldn’t give me a definite answer.

That's why I had to make the first move and speak first. In a purposefully joking manner, almost to the point of sarcasm, I spoke my first words to her.
"Speaking of which, why are you still here, Asagao?" I said, flashing a smile. "Overtime work is usually highly inefficient. Plus, what was that saying again? Leaders that are left to do the work of their subordinates are no leaders at all? Something like that?"
As I said that, Asuha silently gave me a gloomy look.
"Yeah, there's no denying that…" said Asagao softly. "There really isn't…"
I didn't think she took my words at face value. I'm sure she understood what I was trying to get at, and more importantly, what I wanted her to do.
Asagao bowed apologetically. "I'm sorry. Not just Kasumi, but yours as well… It's only natural that you would feel disgusted at the thought of being used…"
Asuha, perhaps not expecting such a sudden apology, instinctively shook her head. "Umm… It's okay, it's really no big deal for me… Don't worry about it," she said, turning to me for some guidance.
I understood Asuha's feelings. It was weird to have someone apologize to you, especially if that person wasn't someone you were particularly close with.
"Yeah," I said in a hurry. "It's really no big deal for me either."
Asagao took a good look at the both of us and smiled. "I didn't think you two would be alike in any way," she said, "but you two are actually quite similar in the weirdest of ways."
Upon hearing that, Asuha and I looked at each other, but Asuha looked disgusted.
"You sure about that…?" she said.
"What? You don't like that?"
"I really don't…" she said, shaking her head furiously.
What's so bad about us being alike? We are brother and sister after all…
Asagao sighed. "Natsume was also the same with her sister… Similar in weird ways…" she said as she stared out past us.
I didn't think she was looking out at anything in particular, but her voice had a hint of loneliness within it.
"Her sister?" said Asuha with a blank look on her face.
"Oh, you haven't met her yet? Kayako Natsume. The previous head was Natsume's sister, you know."
"Well, I know that…" said Asuha. She shot me a look.
She probably wanted me to speak up and say something, but I stayed silent. Instead, she pouted at me and turned to Asagao instead.
Asagao took a sip from the cup on her table. It was likely the same cup of tea that Renge had poured during the day, and she just didn't have the time to drink it until now.
Asagao sighed. "Natsume and me… we were like family."
"Family…?" said Asuha.

Asagao smiled faintly. “We were in the same shelter, and we were awoken around the same time,” she said, taking another sip of her tea. “Originally, I was the younger one though, I think. That’s why we were often together back then.”
I suddenly remembered Asagao’s conversation with Natsume a while back when we had to get our performance reviews signed. At that time, Renge did say something along the lines of Asagao sounding like Natsume’s mother.
In fact, now that I think about it, Asagao didn’t idolize Natsume or anything like that. She didn’t admire Natsume like Renge did, she wasn’t obedient to her like black-eyes, nor did she respect her like Asuha. In my eyes, the two were on equal footing.
“She was even weaker than me when we were just elementary schoolers.” continued Asagao. “She would always cry when she lost to Kayako, you know? That’s why in my mind, she’ll always be a weak little girl.”
Asagao looked down at her cup on the table. For some reason, I couldn’t help but notice the green little tea ripples in her cup.
“But, she… I can’t believe she would say those things! Even though she’s so weak!” With tears in her eyes, Asagao angrily clenched her fist. “And I hate that! It pisses me off seeing her look down on me! I can’t believe I was actually scared… I can’t let her get away with this!”
Asagao’s usual cold and calculating front was torn away by her inner feelings, and she was suddenly left crying, unable to look us in the eye. She tried to stop her tears with a few deep breaths, but that proved futile as she continued to bawl her eyes out.
Just the sight of Asagao in this state was enough to shake up Asuha. She was at a loss of what to do— she looked like to she was about to speak up, but ended up just moving her hands out awkwardly.
I once again completely understood how she felt. Right now, Asagao wasn’t really talking to us personally. She was first and foremost aiming her words at Natsume, but at the same time, she was talking to herself. This was neither the time nor the place for us to interfere.
I didn’t know, or even cared about what happened between Asagao and Natsume. Asagao could have the most touching story and I still wouldn’t have anything to say to her. Right now, Asagao was just one more troublesome thing I had to deal with.
That’s why I was going to leave this for Asuha to take care of.
“Asuha, sorry…”
She turned back to me with a confused look. “Huh? For what?”
“Once Asagao calms down could you accompany her back?” I asked. “I have some work I have to do.”
“Work…” she muttered, shooting me a dirty look.
Her reaction was completely justified, but I didn’t feel I could explain my thoughts. I could have said that I was working off of nostalgia, or maybe I

had someone I was dedicating all my effort to, but I didn't think I could say any of those things to her right now.
That's why I apologized one more time with a fake smile.
Asuha had a feeling there was more to the story, but she didn't object anymore. Instead, she nodded silently and said, "Okay."
She probably knew what was going on, anyway.
"Thanks," I said.
"It's whatever… Don't worry about it."
Once she said that, I had to pat her on the head. She gave me a look of displeasure before turning her head away and standing up to distance herself from my hand. She then walked all the way to where Asagao was and pulled another chair to sit down next to her.
Asagao was still slumped onto her desk, crying. Asuha leaned in on Asagao until her head was comfortably resting on her. She then took out her cell phone to pass the time. It seemed this was her way of comforting Asagao until she calmed down.
From my perspective, Asuha looked like a cat comforting her owner. What she did was no doubt awkward, but at the same time, it was a display of her overwhelming kindness. Unfortunately, I wasn't as kind as Asuha… The only thing I could do was work.
I had already made up my mind on what to do, so there wasn't a point in staying here any longer. So, I took the laptop I would usually leave in the office and quickly left the building.
On my way out, I couldn't help but think of some words of wisdom I once came across:
Only through failure will one get strong enough to succeed.

Chapter 2: An All Out Marketing Push

While the sleeping princess in Kanagawa dreamed of eating cake on her warm bed, the corporate slaves of Chiba, fueled only by caffeine tablets, tapped away their souls on the keyboard.

While the sleeping princess in Kanagawa finally woke up to the beautiful morning sun streaming into her room, the corporate slaves of Chiba slammed their curtains shut so they could do their stress relief exercises without the sun barreling down on their eyes.

While the princess opened her eyes and yawned to a bright new day full of adventure, the slaves cursed the start of a new corporate workday.

They were like marathon runners, running the business day and night. This time I was no different. Working tirelessly through the night, I somehow managed to formulate my strategy.

According to our ancestors of the past, “Those who will not work shall not eat. There is no surviving on bread alone.”

If you cannot work, then you certainly cannot eat. Despite that, our purpose for working was always more than just food. There was always some other reason for doing so… Perhaps it was to fulfill dreams and aspirations, perhaps it was from a sense of duty, or perhaps it was for expressing some gratitude.

It was said that the managers of the past often stated that people didn’t need food to survive as long as they kept their motivation and drive. As absurd as that may sound, it could hold true for very brief periods of time. After all, overworked workers would often forget to eat and sleep, and they still went on with their lives.

If I had to say it more accurately, it was that overworked workers lived off of just enough bland food to survive, all while having anxiety about work even as they slept. They would never have a good night’s sleep and often suffer from sudden panic attacks. Their constantly dried eyes would also desperately blink for moisture throughout the day, resulting in tears.

After seeing all of this first hand, it wouldn’t be strange to say that these workers were all living through motivation and drive alone…

Actually, I guess it would. Once my workday was finally over, once I collapsed onto my bed for a good six hours sleep, and once I had my light breakfast the next day, I would finally realize how strange that sounded.

Strictly speaking, a good work environment equates to having good mental health. Without it, everything goes down the drain.

I guess that’s one more reason why work sucks.

It was well into the day, but I wasn’t in a hurry because I had taken the morning off. I even took the time to stretch out my stiff shoulders before heading out. On the way to work, I thought about yesterday’s events.
I wondered what happened to Asagao and Asuha after I left. I felt bad about ditching them right then and there, but there just wasn’t a whole lot I could do in that situation. Asagao was too worked up, and unfortunately I wasn’t good at dealing with things like that. I didn’t know if Asuha could have dealt with her as well, but she sure as hell was way better at it than I was.
Besides, the thing I should be doing wasn’t to stand there and be awkward as she cried. No, it should be making sure Asagao didn’t win the election.
It was a plan I came up with myself. Of course, that plan was highly dependent on Asagao’s next move, so my next course of action wasn’t completely set in stone yet.
The only thing that was set in stone was the future I had wanted for myself.
—
The office was the same as ever. The all too familiar sounds of the keyboard went right in hand with the expressionless faces of my coworkers.
Someone seemed to be in a particularly bad mood as he started slamming his fingers down with each key press. I guess he must have have annoyed someone else, because then that person started noisily moving his mouse around in an act of protest. Finally, someone else slammed the phone down to shut them both up.
It was fascinating to see them communicate without words— they were almost like dolphins talking to each other through ultrasonic waves. As passive aggressive as they may have been, it way better than the ghastly state they were all in yesterday.
Seems like we’re back to normal…
Renge was going around the office giving everyone the tea she had made.
“Good morning, Kasumi!” she said, walking up to my desk as I settled in.
“H-Hey, good morning.”
Renge put the tea on my desk, and I instantly got a taste of its aroma. Instead of yesterday’s minty herbal scent, today’s tea reminded me of some sweet flowers. Unfortunately, I didn’t have a high heat tolerance, so I had to blow on the tea before I could even take a sip.
It wasn’t long before the tea finally did cool down, and I could go on drinking it like usual. In a poetic sense, the tea was similar to how we, the manufacturing branch, were. Natsume’s harsh words acted like the coolant to all our energy from the fruit party, but thanks to that we seemed to have regained our composure.
I wondered if Asagao was also back to her normal self, since maybe that’s why everyone was acting the way they were. The thought made me curious enough to look around for her, and I caught her just in time walking in with Urushibara.
“Oh, Kasumi, you came,” she said after coming in.
“Good morning,” I replied.

It seemed she was completely back to normal
— it was hard to imagine the mess she was in yesterday. Right now she was cool, calm, and collected, and even flashed out a cocky smile. Her eyelids were still slightly swollen even through her makeup, but her eyes themselves were certainly full of energy.
Asagao's eyes weren't the only one that were like that. There was one other person…
"Don't 'good morning' me, Chigusa," said Urushibara, shoving his hands into his pocket as he sized me up and got straight up in my face. "What time is it huh? Huh??"
I figured this was not the time to make a smart-ass comment, so instead I replied with, "Umm… I did send an email saying that I was taking the morning off…"
I was on the verge of saying that I sent it only to the people who mattered and that's why he didn't get my email, but I refrained from doing so and instead just opted to look away from him. It wasn't long before he got up in my face a second time, though.
Man is this guy a wild animal or something? Why do people like him always want to size me up all the time?
Renge laughed nervously, but Asagao cleared her throat to get things back on track.
"Urushibara, more importantly, we need to get ready for the meeting.
"Yes ma'am!" replied Urushibara. "Wait, meeting? What meeting?"
"Yeah. I didn't make my decision yesterday, right?" said Asagao. She blushed slightly upon saying that, since she was probably embarrassed just thinking about everything that happened yesterday. She cleared her throat one more time, took a deep breath, and said, "Today's the day I'll give my decision."
Her words may have been brief, but they were more than satisfactory to everyone. Urushibara clenched his fist as if to say he was ready for anything. Renge, however, frowned nervously— she must have thought of something.
I just nodded silently.
Asagao took a look at all our reactions and smiled. "Alright everyone," she said, clapping her hands once. "Hurry, let's get ready."
"On it right away!" shouted Urushibara. He dashed straight to his desk and started rummaging through his desk.
Renge quickly went to put away the teapot and cups she was currently holding in her hand.
"Renge," said Asagao, stopping her before she went back to the kitchen area. "I'd like some tea too… Yesterday's tea is fine."
"O-Oh okay!" said Renge. She didn't expect Asagao to say such a thing, but she was happy she did. So, with a big smile, Renge headed off.

Asagao also smiled as she watched Renge dash away, leaving just the two of us left. She then glanced around restlessly to make sure no one was looking this way and tiptoed right beside me.
“Hey,” she whispered into my ear after tapping me on the shoulder, “Thanks…”
I noticed her tiny hands, her slender fingers, her citrus scented hair, her gentle breaths, her soft voice, and above all, I noticed her embarrassment as she awkwardly said those words.
Yes, I noticed a lot of things even before looking straight at her, but as I turned to do so, our eyes met. Her face had turned beet red.
Our faces were close enough that it hindered both our abilities to speak properly. I even wondered if our breaths were mixing together or something stupid like that. Thinking about such a thing got my face all hot, and I too started to blush from the ears.
Once I realized this, I figured it would be weird if I suddenly halted my breathing. Luckily, we both instinctively moved away from each other.
“I mean, tell *Asuha* I said thanks,” she added on quickly after turning away so that I could no longer see her face.
I took a few more steps back until my face no longer felt hot and scratched my head to hide the fact that my forehead was sweating.
“Isn’t better to just tell her yourself?” I asked. “It’s not like I did anything…”
Asagao folded her arms together. “I did, but she said the same thing you just said,” she replied, turning only her head towards me.
I was able to catch a glimpse of her pout, but it was true that Asuha would say something like that.
That’s Asuha for you…
Thinking about it made me smile instinctively. “Really?”
“Yeah. She kept saying she didn’t do anything…” sighed Asuha, but soon she too smiled as well. “Well, I mean, in a way, she was right.”
“Oh? Sorry for my sister, then… She’s not too good at, you know, talking to people and stuff.”
Asagao shook her head. “No, no… Somehow that felt really nostalgic. That’s why, I’m really grateful… So thanks,” she said, pausing. “Alright, time for the meeting. Let’s go.”

She briskly made her way to the meeting room, and I followed her soon after. I could see that although she was small physically, she felt more reliable than ever. Compared to yesterday, she had a much different air around her.

One thing that was in the back of my mind was her saying she felt nostalgic… It interested me more than it should have. During her time with Asuha, they were just snuggled up together, and not a word was exchanged between them.

Who was she thinking of? What made her feel nostalgic?

—

Asagao took one step in the meeting room and took in a big breath of air. There was some sort of invigorating scent that lingered inside it.

“I knew getting the tea hot was the right choice,” she said the moment she spotted the tea.
She seemed speaking to herself, but Renge did look her way. I got the impression that Asagao was apologizing for letting her tea get cold yesterday after ignoring it all day.
Renge’s face lit up. “Thank goodness! It’s a specially made herb tea!”
“Wow, nice. Teach me how to make it sometime, okay?”
“Do I have to? It’s a secret, though~”
The two smiled at each other. It was such a pleasant exchange of words that even I felt myself relax a bit.
“Alright then,” said Asagao after a brief pause. She took a look at all of us in the room. “I’m just going to say it now
— I’m still going to participate in the election, and I’m going to become the city head. I will change the world.”
She spoke with such conviction that I didn’t sense one bit of hesitation from her.
“Nothing will change if we follow Natsume’s way of doing things,” she continued. “It’s been thirty years since the great calamity and the war had changed drastically, yet why hasn’t our system changed as well? I know many people outside the military share the same sentiment as me…”
She spoke softly, but fearlessly. She spoke like her statements were indisputable facts and she knew every single one of them. We had already resigned our fates to forever battle the [Unknowns], and so it became just another daily routine for us. Battles that were once a desperate fights of survival were now mere formalities.
But she was right. We were being judged by standards set a long time ago in desperate times. I’m sure all the people who weren’t in the military didn’t feel too hopeful about their future.
“That’s why I want to become the city head. For my sake… For everyone’s sake… Even for Natsume’s…”
Tears welled up in her eyes once again, and her voice became shaky.
However, this was what she wanted to do— There was no denying it.
“For Natsume?” asked Renge.
Asagao chuckled. “She’s… an idiot, so she’s not really suited for it.”
Even though she said that jokingly, I’m sure there was some truth to that statement.
As it stands now, if the military continued on its path to have absolute control of the city, that would very likely spur rebellions against them. They would then have no choice but to use their forces to keep the peace. However, by doing so, their presence in the front lines against the [Unknowns] would inevitably dwindle, leaving them unable to compete with the other two cities.
The competition with the other cities gave us our identity. After all, we were the defense city in the South Kanto region and we were programmed to strive to be the best. If we started to lose our status and prestige, even

more students would be dissatisfied at the current regime, and they would ultimately join the rebellious cause.
Once that happened, the military would have no choice but to suppress, or even purge the instigators from the other branches. This would lead to a breakdown in our overall system, leaving behind a weakened city. Soon, even more rebellions would spawn, and all hell would break loose.
All respect for Natsume would then be lost. Time and time again have shown that dictators do not have happy endings, and I'm sure this time would be no different.
Asagao's proposal meant that she not only feared this city's future, but Natsume's as well. She did not want that to happen— She wanted to change it.
"That's why…" she said, bowing her head. "For my sake, please lend me your help once again."
Normally, as the head of the manufacturing branch and thus our superior, she could just order us to follow her. She didn't though, instead opting to even bow her head. She did say she was doing this for everyone's sake, but more likely than not she was doing this because it was for Natsume… her lifelong friend.
Yes, she shouldn't be doing this just for Natsume's sake, and I could even argue it was childish to do so, but there's just not a whole lot I could do about that.
That being said, it was precisely because of those reasons that I was happy to oblige. Those were the very words I had wanted to hear. Because she hadn't given up on becoming the city head, I could continue doing what I needed to do, and that was all I needed.
The others had made up their mind as well.
In one swift motion, Urushibara stood up. "Asagao, leave it to me," he said loudly and clearly. His eyes sparkled behind his rimless lenses. "You were the one who picked me up after the military pushed me away. I'll always be right behind you."
"Thanks, Urushibara," replied Asagao with a gentle smile.
"M-Me too!" shouted Renge, clenching both her fists forward. "I'll help you as much I possibly can!"
"Thank you too, Renge."
Asagao bowed her head once again. Her voice was as sincere as it could get, and she almost seemed relieved for a second.
"Let us do a proper meeting this time," she continued, speaking with dignity and grace. She spoke like the boss we all knew her to be.. "I need your honest opinions on how I'm going to win against Natsume."
Hearing this, Urushibara pushed his enormous stack of papers off to the side. Last time he had a large amount as well, but somehow it seemed like there were even more this time. Luckily, he understood from Asagao's words that it was not the time to be using them.

But, Asagao saw that and smiled anyway. “Alright, how about we have our reports first… then we can go on from there.”
Urushibara smiled back, showing his pearly whites that contrasted against his tanned skin.
“Yes!” he shouted, taking his papers back. “We broke even for the fruits party and are currently redefining our perceptual map!”
Renge didn’t seem like she understood what Urushibara was saying. It was some business savvy stuff, so I didn’t blame her.
She confirmed my suspicions when she leaned into me and whispered, “… What’s that?”
“A map that emphasizes the color purple,” I replied promptly.
“Don’t feed her false info like that…” sighed Asagao.
Well, she wouldn’t understand it either way…
In any case, Urushibara kept going with his report.
“We did have excellent attendance for the party, but perhaps we needed to focus more on the clients. As such, we currently have a wealth of good ideas for some guerrilla marketing to help our future prospects.”
I felt like he could have explained that using simpler words… Honestly it sounded like he was just showing off his knowledge.
“Guerrilla marketing…” said Renge, seemingly oblivious to his words.
“It’s exactly like it sounds like,” I said, chiming in. “We market to gorillas to increase revenue.”
“Seriously, stop messing with her like that,” said Asagao. “And Urushibara, can’t you just say stuff in layman’s terms…?”
Urushibara didn’t seem to hear her as he kept on reading from his papers.
“To get a solid representation of our relationships to our clients, I have prepared not only survey reports from our clients, but also started to establish a close rapport with them.”
At this point Renge wasn’t even trying to understand what he was saying. Instead, she just mindlessly repeated some of his vocabulary.
“Rapport…”
“It’s a type of rap, usually done on a boat. Even I could do it.”
“Huh? I still don’t get it…” Renge replied with a blank look on her face.
I cleared my throat and continued on with my farce.
“It’s something that was popular in the past. Every businessman had to be familiar with such a thing. After getting a job, even before the first paycheck, the new hire would get taken away onto a boat and be forced to do a rapport. Even worse, they made you pay for all the fees associated with it… They called this ‘rap harassment’ and honestly it was quite the problem for society, not to mention…”
“Can you please, *please* stop messing with her,” said Asagao, glaring at me.
She then turned to Renge. “Anyways, you might as well learn the word. It might be a good to know, especially since you’re going to deal with customers too.”

Before I had a chance to speak, Urushibahara kept on going with his report. I didn't even think he was paying any attention to us at all, as nothing short of the room exploding would interrupt his report.
"As per the plan, we will now move on with our initiative with a side of strategic dynamism in mind," continued Urushibara with some flamboyant hand gestures. "If I could get an agreeance on our forward movement, then we should be all on the same page."
Urushibara pushed up his glasses the moment he finished.
"Uhh… what language was that?" said Renge.
"The business language? I think?" replied Asagao.
"I don't understand him at all…"
"It's okay. We just need to look over some of his paperwork, just as he had said."
Renge's face lit up. "Oh, I see!"
"I mean, that's the only thing I understood from him…" said Asagao. She looked at the papers that Urushibara was holding.
"Regarding the paperwork…" said Urushibara. He then began to read the data from it bit by bit.
Uhh, Urushibara, you really don't need to do that… It's not like reading it out loud makes it more comprehensible…
But if he really wanted to read it, then we had no choice but to sit and listen. His whole report really was just a waste of time, and that time could be better spent on other things.
Well, I guess this is how all meetings go now, huh… It's not even limited to just us.
Urushibara's ramblings made Asagao completely tune him out. She just sat there reading the surveys Urushibara had gathered from the clients. Once she was done, she piled them all together once again and placed them back onto the table.
"No one else knows about my conversation with Natsume, right?" she asked softly.
"Yeah, that area was completely closed off."
That area in particular was for VIPs only, but their conversation took place in a corner specifically reserved for Asagao.
Looking at the all the data Urushibara had gathered from clients and even just the public in general, there had been no mention of an open rebellion from the manufacturing branch. Perhaps Natsume thought her warning was enough, or perhaps she didn't take us seriously at all… it was hard to know for sure.
However, if we really were going to go against her, it was inevitable that we had to confront her one day. We had to get all the votes we could to win the election, and to do that, we had to put ourselves out there.
"I guess our overall plan will stay the same," said Asagao after a short pause. "We get the other branches on our side to get their votes."

I nodded. Right now, there just wasn't anything else we could do other than that. The whole thing was going to come down to an election anyway. It was natural to aim for the votes.
The real issue was how we were going to do it, and how we were going to deal with Natsume…
"However, the military certainly has got their eyes on us. I'm sure it can be safe to assume that they've already prepared a plan to deal with us, too."
Looks like Asagao had a good understanding of the position she was in. She took the pen in front that was used to take notes and spun it around while taking the time to think.
"There is no doubt in my mind that they will send threats and attacks our way," she said. "Not just us too, the other branches as well. The real problem is, we don't have the means to defend against them. We need to figure out how we are going to deal with that."
She bit the pen in thought and sighed. As she did, Renge bolted her arm up.
"Asagao!"
"Yes, Renge?" said Asagao, pointing the pen in her direction.
"We just have to do everything behind closed doors! Everything will be done in secrecy!"
"That's exactly it, Renge," nodded Urushibara. He was always soft on Renge like that.
"Y-Yeah…" said Asagao. The color drained out of her face as she kept fiddling with her pen. "I don't think that's the wrong approach, but…"
"They're not dumb enough to not catch on," I blurted out.
Asagao nodded.
It was only to be expected. The more secretive we become, the more they would start suspecting us. It would only be a matter of time before they realized what was going on.
"Then we just have think outside the box," I suggested.
Asagao turned to me. "What? What do you mean?"
"Instead of doing everything in secret, we do it out in the open," I said, flashing a smile.
"Say what?"
Both Renge and Asagao were dumbfounded. Urushibara had his usual fit upon hearing what I had to say.
"Huh?" he shouted. "What are you even talking about!?!"
"Once we hide our every move, they won't be able to notice anything that's going on," I explained, saying the first thing that came to my mind. "That may seem okay, but if they don't see anything, it's only natural they start snooping around, right? On the other hand, if we give them something to chew on, they won't look as hard. It's like, you know in school, everyone's trying to figure out who likes who, but if you say it outright in the beginning, no one will bother you anymore about it."
Renge and Asagao still had blank expressions on their face, but there was one person nodding in agreement.

“I see… I can relate to that. I recall talking about that stuff quite a bit… after school, in summer camp, in the park at night, in alleyways…
Wow, Urushibara, aren’t you quite the romantic… And with those locations, you sound like a student from long ago…
“Unfortunately, I don’t think its that simple,” sighed Asagao. “That example would be more accurate if the students actually bargained or made deals with each other.”
Wow, Asagao, aren’t you quite the realist…
Renge nodded to her in agreement. I guess most girls were realists, huh… In any case, it was good to know.
That being said, I did expect her to say something along those lines. I did have a sister who acted like the two of them, and it’s not like I hadn’t learned anything from talking with her all my life.
“Well, humans are doubtful creatures in general,” I replied. “We can show them everything they want and they’ll still think its a bluff, a front, a lie, or something like that.”
Asagao puffed her cheeks. “Exactly.”
“But that’s fine. This is ultimately an election, not an counterintelligence battle. The party who gets more votes will win. That’s why, above everything else, we need to stand out.”
“I-I guess so,” said Asagao with a deep sigh. “But even in a battle of popularity, there’s no way we can win. I mean, we’re in constant battles against the [Unknowns], so it’s only natural that the military will always be on everyone’s minds… This is true for Natsume too, of course. Everyone knows the importance of the military, and I just don’t think there’s anyone who can go against her with that in mind…”
Asagao was, once again, completely correct. There was no doubt that everyone in the city shared her sentiments.
“Man, Asagao, your thoughts are always right on point,” I said. “That’s why we need to throw them a curveball.”
Urushibara’s eyes lit up. “Oh wow, a curveball. You like baseball, Chigusa?”
I don’t know.
Urushibara’s question was surprisingly straightforward. Since he said it like that, I thought I’d turn the situation around and ask him a straightforward question of my own. It seemed that’s how we got the conversation moving, anyway.
“Urushibara, do you like Natsume?”
Urushibara’s eyes widened the moment he heard me. “Huh? What the hell are you saying?” he shouted, his face turning red and his arms trembling.
“T-There’s no way I like a girl like that! Don’t get the wrong idea!”
“That’s not what your reaction is saying…” giggled Renge.
“I really don’t like her!” Urushibara frantically added on. “Really, I’m not lying! I swear to god I’m not lying, Asagao!”
“Don’t turn to me all of a sudden…”

“I don’t want you to think I’m not trustworthy or something, especially with what’s to come…”
Urushibara leaned in on Asagao when he said that, but Asagao briefly drew away in disgust. Depressed, Urushibara quickly cleared his throat and turned back to me.
“For real though, I don’t like her at all. I was kicked out before she even came to be, so how could I have anything for her?” he said. “She, and the rest of the military are all troublesome… especially Leo, Mars, and Pietro… they’re all troublesome, and—”
Urushibara got surprisingly bitter at the end once he started speaking from the heart. He almost seemed spiteful to those three people he mentioned, yet I could tell he tried hard to hide it. I’m sure the non-military students in the city didn’t feel too much different from what he was feeling right now.
“They don’t have the best reputation, do they…”
“Yeah…” Asagao and Renge simply nodded in agreement. They both probably had their own thoughts on the matter that gave them the same conclusion.
Urushibara was empowered after seeing the two agree with him. “I know, right?” he said more enthusiastically. “The engineering and the trade branch, they all hate them… Especially Leo, Mars, and Pietro, those three are especially hated.”
As I thought, Urushibara did harbor some sort of grudge against them. It could have even been jealously, but honestly I didn’t blame him for having such feelings. The boys in the military were the city’s top elites, so they were quite popular with the girls. It was natural for the others to be jealous. Above all, they looked down on everyone who wasn’t in the military. I recently had the pleasure of experiencing this when I went to meet them the other day. They truly believed they were the rulers and everyone else were their servants.
It was true in a way as they were at the top of the hierarchy. It had been that way from the past all the way to the present.
However, this only came to be because of the war. As the fights against the [Unknowns] began to get more routine, and even as the world began to get more peaceful, the military became less respected than it used to be. This led to a sense of hopelessness among the students, hopeless that the military would always rule over their lives with an iron fist.
“That’s why, I think there’s another way of dealing with Natsume,” I said.
Asagao heard that and looked straight at me in anticipation.
“Well,” I said with a slight smile, “What the world needs right now is an instigator.”
“Insti
—gator?” Renge said absentmindedly. She looked even more puzzled.
“Ah!” said Urushibara. A light bulb seemed to go off inside his head. “It’s that, isn’t it? Someone that can really force out the intelligence we need from the other students.”

No. I'm pretty sure you're thinking of an interrogator. This isn't some crime drama, you know…
Asagao gently touched her lip as she nodded. "Someone to get the ball rolling…"
I snapped my fingers at her. "Exactly. War nowadays is just a mere shell of what it once was. This city has been continuously under the rule of the military branch, and might I say that it has been stagnating for quite some time. We need someone to bring change to this city."
The world has long gotten tired of war and the military branch along with it, but it was still difficult to enact change. The military had such a tight grip on the people that it was hard for them to even speak up.
That's why we just need a spark to kick everything off. Of course, it was much easier said than done, and Asagao was well aware of the challenges. After all, she was the one who had spent countless times igniting this spark.
"I understand your reasoning," she said, casually stroking her chin. "But there's no way we could manage it. There's bound to be a lot of people who don't want any change, right? I mean, even with consumer products, people are against any sort of change…"
"That may be true," I said, "but Asagao, *you* have changed after all that you've done."
Asagao gave me another one of her blank looks, and I just shrugged my shoulders.
"Just think of the people like our vegetables. My mother did use to say that the two were really similar, and I believe her. We won't be doing anything different than what we've been doing so far. We've created so many different products so far… and we will continue creating them."
"Oh!" said Asagao. A sparkle lit up in her eye.
She must have noticed who I was talking about, or maybe she thought of it herself.
Up until now, Asagao had been doing work as an instigator and as a leader. The brand fruits and vegetables she had created had long become a staple of everyday life. In order to accomplish that, she had to further elevate her products with advertisements, trade routes, and a steady supply that never ran out.
By doing so, Asagao could create new demands that had never existed before. She even had control over the people's lifestyles to a certain extent. That's why we weren't going to do anything different this time. We were going to take full advantage of the influence she had built up over time.
"So instead of trying to appeal to the higher ups of the other branches, we should go for our consumers…" said Asagao after thinking about it for a little bit. "If that's the case, then we shouldn't be focused on each branch, but rather each person…"
"Is that okay, though? We spent so much time building our relationship with the other branches…" said Renge.

Renge did try her hardest to serve the VIP guests, the branch heads, at the party, so to say that was all for naught was understandably depressing.
Asagao, sensing this, smiled at her. “We won’t let that go to waste. We just need a different approach… kind of like when you buy things. As the head, I decide what we buy for the manufacturing branch, but that has nothing to do with what you all buy for yourselves, right? Sometimes the heads do give recommendations or whatnot, but that’s beside the point.”
I didn’t doubt her one bit. There were certainly people in this world who made those “recommendations” to subtly force others to do their bidding. Back in the day, there was one bike company who “recommended” its employees to buy its bikes… and I’m sure it wasn’t alone in doing so.
“So in other words,” interrupted Urushibara. “We will cease a B to B model and move directly to a B to C.”
“The way you describe it is really irritating, but yea, exactly,” nodded Asagao.
Urushibara frowned in response.
B to B was short for Business to Business, where as the name implied, the business was an enterprise based company. There really wasn’t any point for him to shorten the phrase like that, but I guess he wanted to look intelligent despite making everything sound confusing. Men in general loved putting out sophisticated acronyms to sound cool. FBI, CIA, NATO… acronyms like those always had a certain appeal to them.
On the other hand, B to C was Business to Consumer, where businesses would sell direct to the consumer. This could be a simple retail shop selling goods or maybe even a corporation providing services to consumers.
Up until now, the manufacturing branch had always dealt mainly with other businesses or organizations. We would be in direct contact with the people in charge, find out what they wanted, and use that to our advantage. However, there was always the possibility that the military would start asserting the control they had over us. In that case, the people in charge would scramble to save themselves and would have no problem ditching us for the military to maintain their positions.
With this in mind, it was clear why a new strategy was needed.
“I think that the voting is done in individual booths to ensure anonymity for the voters,” continued Asagao. “Of course, there’s always the possibility of being influenced by the higher ups or just going with the flow, but in general we can consider voting to be a strictly individual course of action.”
“Yeah, we need something to appeal to those individuals,” I said. “Something powerful and impactful.”
Asagao nodded. “The ideal thing would be something that attracts a lot of attention,” she said, tapping her lips. “But at the same time, it has to contain a message that anyone could understand. One that is clear and concise to get people talking…”
I suddenly thought of all those documents I was looking over yesterday night.

In historical terms, the era long ago was actually known as the modern era. During that time, there was a year when world-changing events kept happening one after another. Once in a century wouldn't even come close to describing what a year that was, as even historians thirty years later had a hard time analyzing why things happened the way they did. One thing was sure, though: The events that happened in that year had shook the very foundation of the world.

There was once a powerful country that was known as "the empire on which the sun never sets." In the age of a globalized world, that country chose to isolate themselves in the name of national pride and honor. Despite being cut off from the other powerful nations in the world, they remained quite formidable as they revolted against the global establishment.

No one predicted such a thing to occur in the country, not even the political scientists, economists, or media at the time. Everyday there would be reports of its good approval rating and increased military prowess, and everything seemed to just go smoothly without change.

So why the sudden change? Why did the citizens just suddenly decide to change its society just like that?

For one, the citizens were all influenced by someone to the point where all of their inner feelings came rushing out. Once that happened, they vowed to tear down their stagnated, overdone society for better or for worse to make space for a new one.

So, just who was that person? Well, it was none other than the one who had the most radical ideals.

Asagao took time to gather her thoughts before she arrived at a conclusion not far from what I had anticipated. Her eyes grew wide, and she sighed.

"This time, I am the consumer product, huh…" she said. "My success will depend on how much branding I can get, like all the other products."

She then slowly stood up and wrote her name on the white board. "I'm not exactly jumping at the chance to do this… but let's think of some plans to get me out there. Any ideas?"

She said that and wrote her name on the board.

"Umm…" said Renge. "What do you mean exactly?"

"We need to think of ways to increase Asagao's popularity," I said.

"Ohhhh, I see! Then we just have to think of Asagao's good points!"

Renge clapped and smiled at Asagao. Her smile was so bright and cheerful that even Asagao was taken aback.

"When you say it like that, it's embarrassing…" Asagao said timidly, turning her reddened face away. "But yeah… that's what I need. Unfortunately, I'm going to need your objective opinions only."

The moment she said that, Renge enthusiastically raised her hand, while Urushibara adjusted his glasses once again.

"You're cute!"

"You're cute…"

The two said simultaneously.

Hearing the two say that with such speed and conviction prompted me to do the same. “Yeah, your cuteness,” I said.
I could never just say it spontaneously like they did, since I was too shy to do such a thing.
Looks like I wasn’t the only shy person here, though…
“W-What are you saying!” shouted Asagao. She averted her eyes and then whispered, “idiots…”
This time even her ears were bright red. “You guys got nothing other than that?” she added on.
“There’s plenty more,” I replied. “You are the head of the manufacturing branch, you’re intelligent, you have what it takes to be a leader, your forehead… I could go on and on.”
“My forehead has nothing to with this!”
“No, it really does, since it gives you a certain charm, you see. In fact, I’d say that’s the thing that makes you really cute.”
“Exactly!” blurted Renge. “Asagao is really cute!”
“Stop saying that!”
“Cute, but…” Renge’s voice trailed off depressingly.
Urushibara was appreciating their conversation from the sidelines, and I was too to a certain extent.
“You say that Asagao,” I interrupted, “but Natsume doesn’t have that advantage. That’s why we should go all out on that.”
“I think Natsume is also cute, though…” said Renge.
“Hmm… well, I guess her face is cute,” I murmured.
Renge looked puzzled, but Urushibara just nodded in agreement. I think he knew exactly what I was talking about.
“Ah, but she’s really beautiful, right?” said Renge. “Cute might not be the word to describe her… she’s just so cool…”
I guess Renge got what I meant as well. Good, that just makes my point easier to explain.
“I’m not talking about looks. You can just feel Asagao’s cuteness, but you can’t do the same for Natsume.”
“Ah, I see!” said Renge. “Natsume’s strong, so it’s hard for boys to find her cute…”
Urushibara continued to nod. It was true that Natsume seemed more liked by the girls than the boys, mainly because she seemed like the athletic upperclassman everyone looked up to.
Asagao understood our points, but she did not look happy. “Hmmph!” she said, pouting. “Yes, I know I am weak.”
“Even the way you say that is so cute!” shouted Renge. She leaped toward Asagao and hugged her tightly. “You’re just soo cute!”
In a way, Renge seemed to be cheering her up, but Asagao just kind of looked stunned.
Your cuteness really is your forte, Asagao.

“In any case, being cute is really important,” I said. “My father always used to tell me that looks were everything.”
“Wow, your father seems like a real tool,” Asagao snapped back at me. Renge was now patting her on the head, but she kept ignoring her.
Yup, I don’t disagree with you there… I could say the same for my mom, too.
Well, whatever. What my parents said didn’t really matter.
“But a cat or something is cute, right?” I said, trying to get on track. “They’re really popular, and everyone, including me, loves them. I mean, there’s no one who can just walk away from a kitten in need, is there?”
Asagao eyed me grumpily. “I guess so…” she said. She actually seemed like the kitten here with Renge still cuddling all over her. Perhaps She would be scratching the floor by now if she suddenly grew a tail.
“Sorry, that was a bad example, huh… It’s like, you know, if a cold, stern girl suddenly started to cry, then everyone’s heart would drop from the cuteness… or something like that…”
“K-Kasumi!” interrupted Asagao, flustered. “Not another word!”
“Say what?” asked Renge.
“I’m just speaking for the people,” I replied. There’s no way I could tell her about Asagao’s breakdown last night.
It was also not the time to say that I made my decision because of that incident. That’s why I said I was just speaking for the people. Or perhaps I should have said I was speaking from history, or maybe from some anecdotes.
According to some crazy-haired prime minister back in the day, a girl’s tears were her weapons. This prime minister gained unprecedented popularity through his speeches, boasting a 90% approval rating over his five plus years in office. His citizens were satisfied not only with his policies and promises, but with him as well. Even after his term ended, his political party continued to enjoy the support he had garnered.
As time went on however, the party became complacent, and its support began to waver. Governmental and financial problems began to be overlooked, and the citizens began to grow upset. It was hard for things to change especially in politics, but the citizens were so disgusted with the party that they went on to support an opposing one.
It was unknown whether or not the other party managed to turn things around. I didn’t have much on that in terms of historical information and political knowledge, so I didn’t know. In this case, that wasn’t really important.
What was important was the one takeaway point from all this: Emotions, not logical reasoning, was the true driving force behind changes to government administrations. Pathos trumps logos as a way to motivate citizens.
“We don’t have to bring logic into this,” I said with confidence. “We just have to light a fire within them. As the people of the past used to say, cute is justice!”

Emotions alone could push logical reasoning completely out of the picture. There were certainly risks involved in taking this approach, but that wasn't going to stop me.
I stood up and made my way to the whiteboard. Using a red pen, I wrote the following onto it:
Asagao Tsurube = Cute | Cute = Justice | Justice = Victory
And then, to sum it all up, I wrote some more:
Operation: Idolize Asagao Tsurube! A Spontaneous idol!
"Well, something like this," I said, putting the cap back on the pen. I spun the pen around and softly placed it back onto the table. Usually just placing it on the table wouldn't make much noise, but I guess the room was so quiet I couldn't help but notice it.
"Ummm…" Asagao said with a shaky voice. She trembled as she pointed at the whiteboard. "Kasumi… can you explain this?"
"Huh? Explain? You know what an idol is, right?"
"Yes, but…" muttered Asagao.
Although confused, Renge and Urushibara nodded as well, which is nice since I didn't have to explain everything from the start.
"Okay," I said. I took a deep breath and forcibly tapped on the whiteboard to emphasize my point. "The point is, as long as we make speeches, or even the whole election enjoyable, then it's all good. The speeches will be on the stage, there will be events for the elections, and we'll go all out in flashiness to attract as much attention as possible. Not to mention the nice side effect of gaining some fans on the way. Now, of course we will continue urging the other branches to join our cause behind the scenes, but it is through our careful PR management that will get us the victory."
Urushibara snapped his fingers once I finished my explanation. "Oh my god, that can work! I can see it working!" He burst out laughing.
"Can it really work…?" asked Renge.
"Of course not…" replied Asagao, still shocked at the current turn of events.
You're absolutely right, Asagao. But I can't have you getting cold feet now…
"Yes, it really can," I said. "Just go with the flow and make it flashy."
Besides, it wasn't like there were any strict campaign laws or anything like that. Unlike the olden days, our election process consisted only of anonymous voting from the students.
"U-Umm…" Renge raised her hand.
I nodded her way. "Yes, Producer Renge?"
"Yeah, umm so… wait, what? Huh?" Hearing her called with a title she wasn't familiar with made her all confused.
Asagao sighed. "Don't just start making people producers…" she said, annoyed.
It's only natural for an idol to have a producer. Maybe they weren't too familiar with how idols worked in the past, so I thought I give them some more information on how they operated.

However, before I could speak, Renge loudly cleared her throat to get everyone's attention.
The odd thing was that she didn't seem to be her usual air-headed self. No, she had on a different expression… one so striking to her usual one that I instinctively tensed up.
"You know, Kasumi," she said sternly. "Just now you told her to wing it basically… But is that really the way to go here? Will the military branch really just let us do our thing?"
She brought up some very important points about the whole operation. In fact, when I said earlier that it wouldn't go well, I was referring to these concerns.
"True…" I couldn't think of anything else to say.
"Hey, Chigusa," snapped Urushibara. "Aren't you underestimating the military way too much here? You know they are all idiots, so they're just going to hit you head on and beat us to the ground."
Urushibara was certainly knowledgeable about the military. It was one of the reasons why he sounded so persuasive.
Just as how we were able to pull off this idol thing in this election, without strict rules and regulations, the military was free to do as they pleased. Our election system remained unchanged all these years, but right now it was pretty much just a formality since the head was always from the military.
That being said, as meaningless as the election may have seemed, it was incredibly hard to break the tradition. People expected the election to happen, and they also expected someone from the military to become the head.
I was positive that there were purists in the military who solely believed that the head should not come from anywhere else. That being said, those were the people we could handle easy. They were radicals, but their movements were easy to predict.
"If we make some flashy moves, they won't just sit still and watch it all unfold…" Renge said softly.
I knew she wasn't wrong… but I couldn't budge from my proposal.
"I'll handle them somehow…" I said softly. "Besides, we have an idea of what they're up to, so it should be fine…"
Despite not speaking with much confidence, I did have a plan in mind. However, it was neither the time nor the place to say it. It was a shameful, disgusting plan, and I'd rather not say it right now.
"Should be fine, you say… you sure?" asked Asagao. Unlike Renge who was half covering her face, Asagao looked straight at me. She had her usual wits upon her, and I could tell she was indirectly telling me this plan would not work.
It was a bit passive aggressive, so I decide to respond in the same way.
"Well, yea, I'm sure," I said with my usual smile. I didn't lie, but I didn't really tell the complete truth either. "I do have an idea. But enough about me, Asagao, your part in this is much tougher."

Asagao made sure to let me know that she wasn't entirely convinced. She gave me a look that indicated she wasn't ready to change the topic just yet. I mean, I wasn't lying when I said her part in this was tough. Though I could say it was just the truth in bad taste.
I had no other choice but to push for this to happen. Guiding Asagao this way was a way to achieve what I really wanted to achieve. In fact, if I had to be completely honest, it was the only way I could think of. As powerless as I was, I could at least pull off this extremely indirect and tedious plan.
After a few moments in thought, Asagao finally sighed and relaxed her shoulders. It seemed she had made up her mind and she suddenly straightened up. Her bangs seemed to come alive as it swayed with her, revealing her forehead for an instant.
"Alright, alright," she said. "I'll do it! I'll sing, dance, do some signing events like a real idol, be an icon or a kitten or whatever! I'll do it!"
"Uhh… you're surprisingly hyped about it…" I said.
"I'm just saying what you said earlier!" snapped Asagao.
Urushibara was just as hyped. "That's what I'm talking about!" he shouted, clapping repeatedly. "Let's do it! You'll become an idol, and save our academy! Let's make our dreams come true!"
Damn, Urushibara… He certainly knows how to create hype. He backed up Asagao's resolve without an ounce of hesitation, all to let her know he was right behind her.
With both Asagao and Urushibara all pumped up, the pressure was on Renge to approve as well. With a concerned look on her face, she nodded. "If Asagao's on board, then I guess I am too."
"Hey, you guys forced me to be on board!" snapped Asagao once again, smacking the table in front of her in protest.
Renge forced out a smile in response. She was still worried, but she knew that it was something Asagao wanted to do, no matter how many times Asagao denied it. Renge's gaze said it all
— it was a passionate gaze, one that seemed to pierce right into Asagao.
Asagao groaned. Tears started to swell up in her eyes, but she quickly turned her face away so we couldn't get a good look at it. However, as dejected as she may have gotten, there was no way she could have backed off now. Knowing this, she sighed, and with a cold smile, said, "I'm going to work you guys to the bone."
A cold smile didn't really describe her smile properly. It was more cruel, more brutal.
Well, it was quite fitting for the boss, the king, and the tyrant of the manufacturing branch. With her words, our comeback was about to begin.
—
This might just be completely useless information, but we did still needed railway transportation even to this day. We didn't have a booming network of railroads though, as they only existed as direct paths between cities and

were only used to transport stuff in bulk. Railways nowadays were nothing like the previous eras where they were an essential part in everyday life. However, just like how ancient civilizations made their homes near rivers, people naturally gathered around highly trafficked areas. As a result, the area around the Chiba terminal station was bustling and full of activity. Unlike the ruins that surrounded it, the area had numerous modern buildings lined up within it.

In the early hours of the morning, that area was turned into a pedestrian only zone where cars and trains were banned from coming inside. Instead, various stalls, carts, and other shops were lined up along the streets, just like the Asian night markets of the past.

Interestingly enough, the area was bustling more than usual today. Perhaps the mysterious stage set up right in the center of the busiest area had something to do with it. The surrounding pedestrians were all mesmerized by the sudden appearance of this stage that was literally set up overnight. On a second thought, that couldn't have been it. It wasn't uncommon for the manufacturing branch to set up little things like this, so the stage alone should not have generated this much interest. It was definitely Asagao that got people interested.

She was wearing a brightly colored one piece outfit, with frills and glittery decorative accessories that ran all the way down to her skirt. It was kind of off putting to be honest, since it felt really weird to see her in such an attire. The large gold buttons in front were also weird… The collar ran too low, exposing her collarbone, and the base cloth in general had this metallic finish to it that really turned her into a completely new person.

However, the two next to me were completely mesmerized. Unlike me, they didn't think her outfit was weird at all.

"Wow, awesome!" shouted Urushibara, giving her a thumbs up.

Likewise, Renge excitedly clapped her hands. "That's so cute!"

Despite their compliments, Asagao did not look happy. "I knew I was an idiot for trusting Urushibara to handle the designs…" she murmured with a big sigh.

Her breath was so heavy it seemed to turn anything it touched to stone like a Basilisk. And also like a Basilisk, she stood out like a sore thumb.

She stood as the epitome of flashiness. Her outfit really was vibrant beyond belief, so vibrant that she could catch the eyes from spectators standing far away. I guess this was why the idols of the past always wore these types of things.

This kind of outfit was expected. Asagao was supposed to be the spontaneous idol, after all. If it wasn't spontaneous, the whole thing might not have worked. With the sudden appearance of an idol, Asagao could have a bigger impact and thus cement herself as an idol for the people.

"It's time, Asagao," I said to her after checking my watch one last time.

"O-O-Okay…" said Asagao. Her eyes were welling up, but she fought hard to stop herself from crying. "Are we seriously doing this?"

“It’ll be okay. Just go up and say a few words or something. Don’t worry about it.”
“Just saying a few words? You know I still have to sing and dance and stuff, right?!!?”
She did have a lot of practice these few days, but it was understandable that she was still nervous. I was sure I wouldn’t even be able to get on stage if I was in her shoes.
That being said, she was neither a singer nor a dancer— she was an idol. It was okay if her tone was a bit off, or even if she was clumsy with her feet. In fact, it was probably easier to root for her with her imperfections.
Being an idol really meant working hard alongside both the producer and fans to ultimately achieve your goal. Everyone did love a good underdog story.
Don’t worry Asagao… I will make you the best idol!
“Everything’s going to be alright,” I passionately reassured her again. “You can leave everything to me.”
“O-Okay…” she whispered.
It seemed this time my words did do the trick, since some color returned to her face. She was no longer completely pale in the face, but was surprisingly blushing a bit as she quickly turned her gaze away to the audience.
In front of the stage were some curious boys sitting down in the chairs I hastily laid down earlier. To be honest, I was a little proud of myself for remembering to put those down, even though it was a producer’s job for these kind of things.
As I was still busy giving myself a pat on the back for being such a great producer, Asagao whispered some words into my ear.
“I’m just gonna do whatever, then,” she said, biting her lip. “Since my victory against Natsume has already been secured, right?”
She was a clever girl
— I was sure she was well aware of what was to come. But even so, she continued to play along with my antics, all for the sake of achieving her goal.
Since that was the case, I had to continue playing along. “Alright, good luck. Make it flashy,” I said.
“Roger that, producer. My fails will be real flashy.”
She smiled awkwardly.
♪—♪
On top of the stage, the words *Asagao Tsurube’s Debut Performance* were brightly lit up by a large sign. However, that sign soon went out along with all the other stage lights around it.
A single cute sounding voice blasted through the speakers.
1, 2, 1, 2, 3, 4!
Rhythm beats quickly followed, which signaled the bass and cymbals to let loose. The stage lights turned on along with the music, accompanied by

colorful lasers that bounced around the stage. On top of that, theatrical smoke burst out from under the stage, reflecting the lasers twice over and giving the audience a once in a lifetime light show.
From underneath center stage, Asagao slowly started to rise up among all the chaos on stage, and started dancing to the beat.
“
♪ The flower of love ♪” she began to sing with the mic in her hand. Her dance was slightly off beat, but no one noticed. “♪ Will eventually ♩ bear the sweetest fruit~ ♩ The summer heat ♩ is washed away by the elixir of happiness ♩ Joy all around the word ♩ Tales from the 20th century~ ♪”
Asagao’s idol outfit did kind of remind me of a flower, actually… Even more so with her dance choreography. Still, what a song… I believed Urushibara did the composition and Renge wrote the lyrics.
Despite Asago’s nervous trembles, everything was going smoothly. Off to the side of the stage, Urushibara was snapping with his arms crossed. I couldn’t help but notice the fashionable scarf he had around his neck.
“Sick, Asagao!” he shouted. “This is what winning feels like, huh!”
He burst out laughing once again.
What are you saying? We haven’t won yet…
Asagao’s singing and dancing was not pleasant to say the least. Her performance was not one that people would pay money to see. I was sure she knew that herself, seeing that every so often she would bite her lip in frustration.
Every time her tone was off, or perhaps when she messed up her footwork, the boys from the audience would snicker a bit, but that didn’t stop her at all. Instead, her smile only grew more brilliant the more they snickered.
In time, the snickers, along with the whispers from the audience, came to a standstill.
“♪ A thousand leaves ♪ makes the Mille-feuille ♪ A sudden La France rose ♪ Peanuts scattered all around ♪”
The song was reaching it’s climax, yet Asagao still couldn’t get a good grasp of the tone. Because of that, the people walking by all walked with their hands over their mouths, trying to hide their laughter. Some were even blatantly pointing at her with a sneer.
Despite the flak she got from people all around, the audience was a completely different story. Even when she was dangerously close to tripping over herself, even when she hummed parts of the song she forgot the lyrics to, not once did the audience ridicule her. They were instead clapping to the beat.
The audience only consisted of a few people, so Asagao probably couldn’t hear their claps over the loudspeakers surrounding the stage, but she started shaking her hips and skipping her feet with the claps. On top of that, she even made a cute gesture with her hands and gave them the wink of a lifetime.

“The fruits from summer ♩ are the forbidden fruits ♩! C * H * I * B * A! ♪ Chiba ♪!”
A loud bang suddenly followed her explosive end, and with it a tremendous sprinkle of gold glitter shot out. Asagao managed to finish the song, albiet completely out of breath. Still, she took a bow, and the audience clapped in return.
And with that, Asagao’s first live was over. Her subpar performance clearly indicated a lack of practice, resulting in a meager audience size. Even worse, she suffered the ridicule of the passerbys as they continued to make fun of her.
I didn’t need to say how the live went. What Asagao earned from all this was just the smiles and applause from a small group of people.
Well, then.

Chapter 3: To Make the World a Better Place

Part 1

The love for idols seemed to be invigorated once again as Asagao continued to perform more and more. She had brought yet another avenue of happiness into the world and was met with passion and fervor by her fans.

All the documents I had scrounged through usually said the same thing: Music and entertainment was what gave people the most influence over others. As such, they served as the catalyst for societal change and could even be considered the driving force for the anti-establishment movement. Whether the people of the past actually believed such a thing was another story, but there must have been at least some truth to it.

These societal influencers came from all over. They could be comedians making some witty political commentary, a singer, or even a blogger. If I had to guess, they began their careers because they loved what they did, and just wanted to make it big. However, once they picked up steam, they would notice that their actions went beyond anything they had ever imagined. Whether it be singing, writing, drawing, or film making, they began to feel their influence change people. It was almost like an awakening for them, when they realized they held a great power even in the absence of military and political strength.

Again, it was important to note that this could come from *anything*. Regardless of the source, it would always resonate emotionally with the people, whether it be from some hidden anger from within them or an escape they had always longed for.

Music especially provided an unparalleled driving force that lit a fire within anyone listening. This fire, if fed with fuel, could become the symbol of any and all resistance against tyranny, persecution, dictatorship, and discrimination. That's why sometimes in the past, all forms of entertainment were heavily regulated to the point of becoming propaganda. In the most extreme cases, some songs were outright banned.

Chiba wasn't any different. The city's constant state of turmoil would only serve to spread Asagao's voice. With the sudden appearance of a never before seen idol, it was only a matter of time before she reached the hearts of everyone. It was going to be awkward at first, but through her persistence she would slowly start to get a following.

Her first performance only resulted in getting the few people who just happened to be there to talk about it, and it wasn't like they were singing praises about her. She definitely got her fair share of criticism from them, but the main thing was that she put herself out there and people noticed. People noticed her sweet voice that seemed to tickle their ear and her slightly off melody that resonated with them. They heard the song's cute lyrics and saw her even cuter outfit. They saw her unwavering smile that

shot straight to the hearts of even the people making fun of her. Her resolve to finish the performance to the end did not go unnoticed, despite her nervousness and embarrassment that led to a slight breakdown in choreography.

Above all, she was becoming more masterful with each step on the stage, and it was quite enticing to some onlookers . As a result, there was a group who were rendered completely speechless during the later stages of that performance. So much so that they dropped all their initial negativity and replaced it with simple words like “cute”, “wow”, or “awesome.”

On the other hand, there were a good number of people wondering what the hell happened to her and why she was doing such a thing. They even dubbed the mesmerized audience as having an “Asagao craze.”

To be fair, that wasn’t too far from the truth. Even the most effective and modern medicines couldn’t cure this sickness if it was one. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they were all somehow mentally hypnotized into having it. In any case, they had it whether they wanted to or not.

Soon, this craze would spread, and those who were infected would show symptoms similar to those infected of the past. They would start using the same vocabulary declaring their fandom, even resorting to calling themselves Asagals. They would go to every single one of Asagao’s performances, be on the lookout for any information relating to her, create fanart, and even use up their time and money to send her gifts. It was only a matter of time before she had a following big enough to fill up every one of her performances.

Once she got the momentum on her side, her name would spread like wildfire. Even small mentions of it would add up considerably, and she would soon take the city by storm. The fear of missing out is a powerful tool — Once more and more Asagals started to proudly identify themselves as such, others would want to join in as well. It wouldn’t be long before her fan community would explode to unexpected proportions. The Asagals would get more people to join in, and in turn they would get even more people and so on.

As Asagao grew her following, she would inevitably attract some female fans. Within them would be some who had an inflated sense of self worth among all the male fans just because they were female. And thus the notion of princess Asagals would be born.

With princesses now thrown in the mix, it wouldn’t be a stretch to say that Asagao’s following were almost separated based on “class.” Princesses aside, her followers would consist of commoners, knights, and even slaves to an extent. The upper classes would try to fight each other for her attention, and the commoners would just watch idly. During her performances it was like she was in charge of a small kingdom, with all her citizens waving their penlights as if they were casting some magic spells.

Well, it was my job to get them their wands. As Asagao improved, we also had to step up our appeal game. In the beginning, we were just handing out fliers, but now we had designed pen lights with her name printed on it. We also had many other goods along with that, including a wearable Asagal fan jacket, and they were all distributed before each performance for free. Manufacturing goods was what we were good at, after all.

Once everything was distributed, Asagao would have her performance just as planned. The bass would be low enough to shake your heart out, but that would be accompanied by the claps, cheers, and screams from the audience as the light show began once again.

These shows would go on for consecutive days and nights, and many times the audience would have to stand because there weren't any seats set up. Despite that, they would still wildly chant Asagao's name before each performance. Then, the theatrical smoke would rise from the stage accompanied by a blast of gold glitter. Lasers that seemed to slice through the dimensions lit up, and of course Asagao would jump out from the center of the stage.

"Everyone! Thanks for coming!" she would shout. "I'm already getting fired up!"

Words like these have long become her standard greeting, which she usually followed up with a sideways peace sign. It certainly did make the crowd go wild.

"Alright, gonna do a new song, okay~ It's called, *the Revolution*!"

A wild violin intro started, and Asagao danced to its beat. Her dance skills left much to be desired as usual, but more importantly, it was cute. Her current crowd size dwarfed that of what she had in her initial performances, making it quite the sight to see.

With more people came more hyped chants, and it seemed that the synergy in the crowd was at an all time high. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Asagao had learned to expertly control the crowd after her many performances. In any case, this could obviously be attributed to her rising popularity, but also to her fans' enthusiasm and energy.

In the front row, there stood a person worthy enough to be called her biggest fan.

"Alright everyone!" he shouted with a loud, hoarse voice. "Three… Two… One!"

That person was none other than Urushibara. He played a big part in recruiting more Asagals and gathered them all together for her performances. We decided that he was supposed to be a producer, but somehow he turned out to be something more like the president of her fan club…

As well he should be. He was the most devoted fan I had ever seen. With the information he gathered from the books of the past, he was able to create, edit, print, and distribute booklets containing his different shouts, hand

motions, and claps to use during her performances. Even now he was leading the crowd with those shouts without missing a beat.
He really is amazing… Perhaps from now on I'll start referring to him as Idol Lover Urushibara.
Once the song was at its climax, a huge bright light popped up in the midst of all the pen lights from the crowd. I had to rub my eyes to get my vision back since it blinded me, but it seemed like one of those red light sticks air traffic controllers would use to direct airplanes as they landed. In any case, it was much, much brighter than even those.
"YEAH TIGER!!" the people around the red light shouted in a strange voice. Honestly, I had absolutely no clue why there were saying that.
"YEAH TIGER! FIRE! CYBER! FIBER! DIVER! YEAH!" they continued shouting.
I guess they only wanted to shout some words that rhymed, but they were so random that I wanted to know who they were. After taking a good look around, I noticed they were further than I thought.
They consisted of a tanned person with blonde hair and a nose piercing, a tattooed boy with dreadlocks, and a silvered short hair punk wearing a tank top and sunglasses. I recognized them as our enemies from the military… They were the ones with the weird names, weren't they? Leo, Pietro, and Mars… I guess this kind of atmosphere was right up their alley, so I shouldn't be too surprised they were here.
In any case, they were seriously hyped up and going all out. In fact, they were so noisy even the people around them were giving them dirty looks for being so annoying, but they didn't seem to care one bit. If anything, they were shouting louder and dancing harder for each look shot their way.
From the looks of it, they could go on all night with those shenanigans, but suddenly I heard them quiet down. As I turned to see what was going on, I caught Urushibara running up to them from the corner of my eyes. There was a pause in between the songs, so I was able to slightly overhear them.
"Leo, hey man… I told you that those yeah tiger shouts are not okay, right? Pietro you too man, you can't be shouting that here," Urushibara calmly said to them. "Also Mars that big light stick has got to go."
Urushibara spoke much calmer and colder than he usually did, so much so that he seemed like a different person. Perhaps this Urushibara was still in his idol fan mode, and that's why he seemed different from his usual self… So I thought, but once Leo and crew started sneering at him I knew it was the Urushibara we all knew.
"Huh? Wait, wait a sec… Uru-uru, what do you mean we can't be doing that here…" jeered Leo. "This is how we hype up the crowd even more, right? This is our obligation!"
"About that… You aren't hyping anyone up with that," replied Urushibara. "You guys are all over the place… At least try to do what everyone else is doing, okay?"
"Whatever, man," murmured Pietro.

Off to the side, Mars grunted unpleasantly.
“Hey, you know…” snapped Urushibara. He was firm and resolute, unlike his attitude with them the other day. “If you aren’t with us, you’re no better than the newbies who know nothing at all. But at least those newbies aren’t as annoying as you guys.”
Urushibara spoke like the true idol fan he was and that resulted in a standoff between them. He sure picked a minor thing to argue about them with, though… Perhaps this was just how idol fans were, seeing that Urushibara was a die hard one.
He continued to yell some words like “I am the authority here” or “follow the rules,” and started to chase them out as if he was a wizard repelling the darkness. His fellow wizards quickly backed him up, and together they formed a blockade to block them out.
The three, perhaps feeling heavily outnumbered and overwhelmed, muttered some expletives under their breath and left.
I couldn’t help but smile. It was certainly an unprecedented event.

Part 2

Asagao ended yet another song. She wiped her forehead before reaching out to the packed crowd.
“The next song will be the last~” she shouted out.
“Awwwwwwwwwww!” the crowd shouted back. She always prefaced her last song with that, so by this point it was one of her expected lines.
Asagao took a quick drink of water and smiled.
Without a moment’s delay, the crowd simultaneously asked, “How’s the water?”
“It’s amazing!” she playfully responded with a giggle. It was amazing to see the crowd and her communicate with each other.
“Before that,” she continued, “I just have to say something, okay? Did you all know the election’s coming up for the next city head? And I’ve decided to enter that election! It’s gonna be a tough fight, and I’m sure some of you won’t like me as a candidate. But! I can’t give up! I need you all to forgive me just this once for being so selfish…”
Asagao rubbed her eyes as if she was crying, which made the crowd yell out words of encouragement.
“Good luck!” some cried out. Others shouted, “don’t cry!”
She seemed to be waiting for them to say that. Once they did, she took a deep breath into the mic before ramping up her energy once again.
“You can hate me all you want, but please don’t direct that hate at Chiba!”
It was a cheesy line with no particularly deep meaning behind it, but it did the trick. The crowd was moved to tears as they yelled out in support.
“Roger that!”
“I love Chiba!”
“Good luck!”
“You’ll always have our support!”
“Asagao!”

They threw out a mix of everything, but there was one thing for certain— They loved Asagao and would support her no matter what, almost as if she was their cult leader. They were *that* dedicated.
Thinking about it now, she did remind me of ancient leaders that had religious and political power over its constituents. Asagao already got the former done, and she was gunning to become the latter as well.
However, politics were the furthest thing from her mind right now. She concentrated on building her following so she could more easily spread the word about the election. Then, when she ultimately did announce her candidacy, she would already have a sizable backing just from her existing fans.
In essence, this was the “Spontaneous Idol” plan. Well, one part of it anyway.
“Thank’s so much! I’ll be sure to sing the next song even better with the energy I get from you all! Alright, it’s time! Here is, *Let’s Go Chiba*!”
She gave the crowd a playful look like the performer she was, and the crowd eagerly waited for what was to come. Surely, they had to know. For most of them this was certainly not their first time coming here.
Surprisingly enough, the sound that followed wasn’t from a drum or guitar, nor did it resemble any sort of rhythm or melody. It was a low rumbling sound that seemed to come closer by the second, accompanied by loud and annoying honking. The smell of engine exhaust also began to fill the air.
Suddenly, the entrance burst open to reveal Natsume’s right hand woman, black-eyes, leading the charge with a bunch of cars and motorcycles behind her. She had brought her own crowd with her. I guess it was Leo and crew that were the ones that called them out here.
With her signature black eyeliners, black-eyes stopped and glared out at Asagao’s crowd. She was intimidating enough to cause it to part out like Moses and the Red Sea, which gave her a clear path to stomp towards the stage.
She’s finally here, huh...
With everyone’s focus on black-eyes, I quickly made my way backstage. Once I was there, Renge whispered, “K-Kasumi… what should we do?”
I knew she was there to help prep for the next song, so I simply said, “Get ready to keep the electricity and the mic on at all costs.”
“What?” replied Renge, but I left without saying anything else and made my way around.
I could see that Asagao was still standing center stage. “Hey, Asagao,” I called out from the side. Once she turned around, I gestured to the mic. Asagao nodded calmly— she knew what to do.
“Umm… Tsurube?” black-eyes shouted from below. “Sorry to say this, but can you like, stop? This has got to go away.”
She was standing firm with her arms crossed, and you could tell she was pissed just from the look in her eye.

“Why should I? Just because you said so?” Asagao shouted back, shrugging her shoulders. Unlike black-eyes, Asagao was smiling. “You know, I can’t betray all the people who took time out of their lives to come out here!”
“Exactly!” Urushibara yelled out. “Why did you guys even come here! Go back! You have no business being here!”
Urushibara jumped out in front of black-eyes to block her from advancing. Black-eyes just sighed annoyingly. She turned behind her and muttered, “Do it.”
“On it,” responded Leo, nodding, as he quickly made his way to Urushibara.
“C’mon Urururururu. Don’t get too ahead of yourself, YOU HEAR ME???”
He lunged at Urushibara and knocked him down with a punch to the stomach. Urushibara wasn’t able to fully take on the blow, so he stumbled back to his knees, gasping for air.
Pietro and Mars laughed maniacally behind Leo. With a shout, Pietro too leapt at Urushibara, but this time he dropkicked him right in the face.
“URUSHIBARA!” Asagao couldn’t help but scream once Urushibara took that kick, but he waved his hand out.
“It’s… It’s okay…” he said weakly. “I’m used to… this.”
He slowly got up and turned back to her. It was hard to see the extent of his injuries until he turned around, and boy was it serious. Just looking at his face got Asagao even more hysterical, seeing that his forehead was pretty much split in two with blood gushing out.
Asagao wasn’t the only one in hysterics upon seeing Urushibara in this condition. The crowd behind him who had been watching nervously went crazy as well— they shouted, screamed, and just got so loud I was sure they could be heard from miles away.
Hearing this, the three maniacs laughed. I suppose this was like music to their ears, and they were enjoying every bit of it.
“Idiot. You went too far,” black-eyes said nonchalantly, poking Pietro on the head. This time she turned to Mars instead and gave him a signal.
Immediately, Mars took a foldable chair next to him and chucked it at one of the support beams that held up the stage. He then went up to the stage and just started tearing it apart. He went at the speakers, the lights… he destroyed everything in sight.
I guess it was good that he chose not to use his [World]… Perhaps even he knew that would be going too far. Actually, maybe he just didn’t need to. He could mess up all up without using it, anyway.
When he was done, the stage was in shambles, and the audience started to flee all over the place.
“Everyone! It’s dangerous, so get back!” Asagao yelled into the mic. “Don’t get close to the them! Come to our branch for safety!”
The manufacturing branch members who received the orders ahead of time started to help the people evacuate. As they did, Asagao angrily turned back to black-eyes.
“Enough!” she yelled out. “You won’t get away with this!”

Black-eyes just scratched her head and yawned. She nodded towards Asagao without so much as a response to her. Immediately, the three jumped up to the stage and surrounded her.
Despite this, Asagao glared back at them without backing down, even though the situation turned rather grim for us. Leo was even showing off by threateningly punching the air around him, but that caused the crowd to yell all sorts of things back at him.
Asagao stood her ground during all this commotion. “This is… the military’s way of doing things!” she yelled out once again. “They know nothing but violence and brute force! Look at this tyranny! But me… I will not bow down to this! I will NEVER!”
The speaker was pretty damaged at this point, so occasionally it would play nothing but some static noise while she talked. That didn’t faze her, however. She stayed firm and resolute with her words.
“You go girl!” the crowd yelled back. Their voices may have been soft and shaky individually, but together they roared. They were each feeding off each other’s energy, and that made them a force to be reckoned with. It was as if single droplets of water combined to form a raging river.
Tsk. Black-eyes became frustrated seeing the crowd in such an uproar. She raised her hand to give another order, and quickly her own crowd of military branch members did roars and sneers of their own.
All hell had broken lose— it looked like the whole city was at war with each other.
“I will become the city head!” Asagao shouted into the fray. “I will give this city the change it needs! That’s why…”
“Can you all just shut up!” interrupted someone with a microphone. “Everyone, SHUT UP!”
Through all the incessant hollering and screaming, I instantly recognized the voice. Most people didn’t, so they searched around frantically to see who it was.
It wasn’t long before everyone knew what was up. A girl had walked to the front of the military crowd, putting the wrecked entrance and broken lights behind her.
It was none other than Megu Natsume. She held a large magnum handgun in her hand, which was probably her specialized weapon. The handgun was the largest I had ever seen— It was pretty much a huge lump of metal crafted to have as much firepower as possible.
In fact, looking at her hold that gun just didn’t feel right. The lump of metal was a far cry away from her beauty and grace. Or perhaps I was just afraid of it. After all, she was intimidating enough with that gun to make anyone freeze in fear.
For a split second, freeze in fear they did. That brief period of time was enough for Natsume to light up her handgun with a faint blue aura.
That aura was illuminated with the glow of [Worlds] as we called it— the essence of life and death. In this case, despite its beauty, it felt more on the

death and destruction side. It was mysterious enough turn some of our fear into admiration and amazement, including Asagao.
However, the sight of Natsume wrapping her finger around the trigger quickly snapped her back to reality. “Everyone, get out of the way!” she shouted.
It was too late— The sound of the gunshot quickly drowned out her desperate voice. The muzzle flash from the gun illuminated so far out it touched the night sky, but it didn’t dim back down. Instead, the flash formed into a beam of light that jumped out from the barrel.
In the blink of an eye, the land around us was instantly decimated. Even when the smoke had cleared and everything had settled down, there was absolute silence. We were speechless from seeing everything around us get instantly razed to the ground.
In fact, the only sound came from half the stage finally hitting the ground after being blown away from the blast. Natsume managed to grind the commotion to a halt with just one shot. With her overwhelming power, everything was under her control once again.
She slowly made her way to the remnants of the stage of which Asagao still stood. Her presence alone was enough to get people to back away once again, giving her a clear path to the stage. I could tell that the difference between them two were like night and day. Asagao was covered head to toe with dirt, while Natsume didn’t even have a single speck on her.
Asagao’s knees wobbled until she finally fell to the ground. Just being near that blast was too much for her body, and her clothes evidently, to handle.
“I told you, didn’t I,” said Natsume, staring Asagao down coldly after getting face to face with her. “You’re powerless. You can’t do anything.”
She spoke the cold, hard truth of this world with such anger that she felt one step away from breaking out into violence.
“Do you understand now?” she continued. “This is what real power feels like. What can you do in this situation?”
Unlike last time, Asagao neither was overwhelmed nor did she even lose her composure. “Ah yes, real power, huh?” she said, staring Natsume back right in the eye. “You sure used it to really *help* out the city.”
The two wouldn’t budge one bit as they continued to silently stare each other down. It lasted for a while, but it was Natsume who averted her eyes away first.
“Next time I won’t go as easy on you,” she said. “Tread lightly.”
With that, she was off. She gave a quick “let’s go” to black-eyes and the rest of the military, although some of them still looked unsatisfied.
Her time here was brief, but destructive. Natsume left behind a battered Asagao and a silenced, yet frustrated crowd. Many people were still trembling at what just happened, though that didn’t stop them from feeling sympathy for Asagao.
She grabbed her mic and stood back up. “Sorry, everyone, for this,” she said, wiping the dirt off her face. “But there’s no way we can let them get

away with this kind of stuff any more! They could say anything they want, but I won't back down!"
She smiled, trying her hardest to hide her tears. No matter how much she had to endure, no matter how much she had been threatened, she did not lose that smile.
Her smile was met with joyful cheers from the audience, but there was something different about those cheers this time around.

Part 3

At the end of the day, everyone who came made it home safely. As for us, we quickly figured out what to do with the stage and returned back to the office. Everyone except for Urushibara, obviously. Right now he was probably getting stitches on his forehead at the hospital.
"Sorry about this, Renge, but can you take care of this?" Asagao handed her the dirtied stage clothes she wore earlier and headed to the shower room. Even though she had changed into new, more relaxing clothes, she was still quite dirty herself. Even her forehead was sullied— a rare sight.
After Asagao left, Renge laid the clothes out and sighed. "What should we do with these…" she whispered. The once new clothes were now ragged pieces of cloth.
"There's no saving them, so might as well get rid of them," I said. "Maybe we should auction them…"
"N-No! Not that!" shouted Renge, pulling the clothes away from me.
The fact that she thought I was serious was more insulting to me than her not getting my joke. There was no way I'd do such a thing, and I thought that much was obvious.
"I'll just toss it. The set may be the same for the next performance, but the stage clothes will be different anyway."
"O-Okay," nodded Renge. She paused. "Wait a second… we're still going to continue having them?"
It wasn't a surprise that she said that, as I was sure many other people who were there would have the same concern. After all, there wasn't anyone that could stop them… One misstep and there could be plenty of casualties on our side.
But there wasn't anyone hurt from yesterday, right?
"Asagao did say she was never going to back down, but I think she's going too far…" said Renge, handing me the clothes. "Plus, I don't want to continue putting our fans in that kind of situation again…"
"For the new clothes, can you just pick out whatever's good in the wardrobe later?"
I tried to change the subject to what we should be focusing on right now.
"Okay!" Renge fist pumped the air and dashed off. She sure was really into it despite me telling her to do it later.
I smiled at the thought of seeing her so pumped up and went to toss the clothes in the dumpster. By the time I came back, Renge was already back

trying out different parts on herself. The clothes were tailored specifically for Asagao, so it did fit a bit tight on Renge's voluptuousbody.
I guess my distraction worked a little too well.
"What'd you think about this?" she said, doing a little twirl with the miniskirt she was trying on. She did a peace sign with her right hand while holding the mic with her left. "Cute, right?"
"Ah, sure. Yeah, yeah, very cute, very cute," I hastily responded. Yes, the clothes were cute, but I was more confused on what the hell she was doing. She looked so out of place doing this in the office that thinking she was cute was the furthest thing from my mind.
"Really? Like the cutest you've ever seen?"
"No, not the cutest," I replied. My sister would always be the cutest in my mind, and nothing comes close to her at all.
"Really? What a shame," murmured Renge, picking up another outfit from a big stack she had laid down earlier. "What about this one?"
She was cute, probably the second cutest thing I had ever seen, but at this rate it would take forever to go through all the outfits.
"They are all good," I said, trying the most generic response possible. I wanted to wrap things up as soon as possible.
Renge pouted. "If they are all good then which one should I pick?!? I wanted you to pick it…"
I'm just as stumped as you are…
She picked up more clothes and kept posing with them around the mirror. Every time she did that, I went "wow!" or "nice!" and clapped.
But that did not last long. Before we knew it, we heard a voice go, "What are you two doing…"
Having come back from her shower, Asagao stood dumbfounded near the door. She had the same reaction I had when I first saw Renge with her shenanigans.
—
Night fell, and so had our energy with it. Renge had calmed down significantly after changing back to her school uniform. Asagao was just relaxing as well. She was wearing some very comfortable clothes and still had a towel wrapped around her head.
Every so often she would stretch out a little bit as if she was right at home. Perhaps she was too exhausted to put up her usual front.
"Ummm, Asagao…" Renge said softly. "Ummm… so… you don't want to do any more performances, right?"
"Huh? What are you talking about? Of course I do," snapped Asagao. She sounded a bit rude, but Renge wasn't fazed because that's how she usually talked.
"Okay…" she said. "But don't push yourself."
"It was no big deal. I knew they were bound to come sooner or later." Asagao shrugged nonchalantly. She sure wasn't this calm back on the stage, even though her words indicated that she should have been.

“Uhhh… but you were crying…” said Renge.
Asagao smiled awkwardly. “I know, that was some great acting by me, right?” she said jokingly. She turned to me. “I played the victim well, didn’t I, Kasumi?
I shrugged my shoulders. As I expected, she understood what she had to do. Asagao puffed her chest out triumphantly, but that only made Renge even more confused.
“What are you two talking about?” she asked.
“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” I recited. For some reason I began spurting out something I had read before. “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”
“What does that even mean…” Renge said. “Also honestly that sounds kind of creepy.”
Asagao didn’t seem to take my words too kindly as well.
“There were some words like that in the Gospel,” I said. “I think either from Matthew or John, I don’t know. Well, the point is, why are good people always getting the bad end of the stick? According to them, it’s because the world itself is crooked.”
“Sounds like a whole lot of nonsense,” interrupted Asagao.
I smiled. “It really does… Calling the world crooked isn’t going to do anything for us. Apparently a lot people who eventually became kings had that mentality, though.”
There have been countless instances in the past where leaders rose to power by playing the victim card. Perhaps this came from values taught by religion, or just how politics worked in general, but people tended to support the underdogs, especially ones that played right to their emotions. And that’s what our plan came down to. By really putting Asagao out there and showing how much she was being victimized, we could gather sympathy from the others and unite them as one under our cause. With enough support, we could begin our rebellion. It was no surprise that everybody wanted to root for the heroine against the big evil corporation, so we just had to play into that.
The biggest movements were the ones where people united as one. By doing so, everyone becomes shrouded in anonymity behind the cause, and they could fight back using their strength in numbers. In our case, we had to villainize the military to accomplish this. Without a bad guy to fight against, there could be no rallying cry to fight behind.
Asagao understood this and played her part perfectly— The election was the battlefield, and the military was the evil that had to be defeated. What a spectacular performance.

“It’s not the perfect underdog story, but at the very least we won over some of the people,” she said. “I do need to continue to gather support with the other branches again, though, and of course we need to keep this up.”
She really was determined to do this to the very end, so I had to be straight with her. “Asagao, you got a target on your back for sure. So this time it’s probably better to leave that to Renge. Maybe we can even use you as a decoy and fool them a bit.”
“A decoy, huh?” she said. “It doesn’t sound too appealing, but you’re right. Renge, you also have friends in the engineering and trade branches, right? Can you do it again? We’ll pull off some stunts to get their attention in the meantime.”
“Absolutely! My ex-military friends… Yeah, I’ll hit them up!”
“Alright thanks. You handle that, and as for the gifts…”
Once again, my great skills had not only gotten me away from the spotlight, but away from the negotiating table as well. This was probably for the better, anyway.
What else did I need to talk my way out of?
As I pondered that, I noticed that Asagao seemed to have something else on her mind.
“What’s wrong?” I asked her.
Asagao shook her head. “Ah, nothing… I was just wondering why Natsume would transfer students in the first place. Why doesn’t she just boot them out of the military like her sister? Urushibara certainly didn’t have the luxury of being transferred anywhere.”
Renge and I both looked at each other. I hadn’t really thought about this, but if Urushibara was in the military at one point, then it had to be under the previous head, Natsume’s sister. I guess if I was in the military during that time, I would have gotten dismissed right alongside him. The fact that Nastume took the extra steps to transfer us made me think she had something else going on.
“Whatever, I’ll just find out next time,” I whispered to myself.
But Asagao heard me. “How?” she said, eyeing me suspiciously.
As I was about to answer, the man himself suddenly came frantically crashing in on us. His forehead was wrapped up with all sorts of bandages, and from his expression alone I could tell he was in some extreme pain.
“Renge, you don’t have any painkillers do you?” Urushibara shouted on the verge of tears. “I actually can’t function with this much pain on my forehead. Let’s report this and get them a lifetime ban on our events!”
Asagao poked him on the forehead. “All reports are supposed to go to you, remember…?”
Urushibara winced in pain. Seeing this, Asagao just sighed, but her lips slowly crept up to a smile. I was sure she was secretly proud of him for what he did back there. I guess this was her way of saying thanks.

“Renge, go ahead and bring it out,” she said with a smile. “Also, can you get some refreshments? Kasumi, you go too. While we’re all here, let’s catch up on a few things.”
With a nod, Renge cheerfully got up and went to get the supplies, with me following right behind her.

Part 4

Now in the office supply room, Renge took out some medicine from a glass cabinet and lined them up on the table.
“Umm…”
While she did take some painkillers out, she also took out some aspirin, anti-inflammatory medicine, anti-depressants, and all sorts of other medicine. Perhaps curiosity got the best of her when she was looking through everything, and she just picked out everything that seemed like it could help him out. It was hard to tell which drugs were which with everything just thrown out there, especially since the names of the medicine were confusing. What looked like a painkiller could just as easily be a sedative. One thing I could tell was that the medicine here were exactly the like ones I took as a kid. I knew because I recognized the packaging… I guess some things never changed. These were the medicine that I had needed and would continue to need in the future.
“Can I take some as well?” I asked.
“Oh yeah, sure,” Renge replied halfheartedly. She was so focused she didn’t even take her eyes off the table.
I grabbed some of the pills I recognized and shoved them into my pocket. I knew which ones to get, but did Renge? You couldn’t just pick out some medicine that looked right and give it to him like that. Sure, Urushibara looked like he could take literally anything, but giving him random medicine could put his life in danger. It could just be a waste too… We didn’t even know if any of these could help him.
“Urushibara’s injuries were all pretty superficial,” I said. “Are you sure its aspirin he needs?”
Renge threw out her chest triumphantly. “Yeah, he needs it! It’ll help with his headaches! Don’t know why though!”
She spoke with confidence, but I was not convinced one bit. Seeing my uncertainty dampened her spirits a bit.
“B-Because…” she continued, her voice noticeably less confident. “None of us knows much about medicine… We do manufacturing, but for medicine and all that we’re dependent on the Administration Bureau…”
“I see. I guess that’s expected… I mean, it would be bad if they just let us make our own. I certainly wouldn’t trust myself or any other student to make our medicine.”
“Yeah,” said Renge, “but making our own alcohol is kind of pushing that line a bit already…”
“That alcohol was the result of fruits that just happened to ferment in Kisarazu.”

Renge frowned. “Sure, sure it was.”
She didn’t press the issue any further, even though her body language said otherwise. Instead, she went to the sink to brew some tea. I assumed it would be the same tea that she had been brewing for the past few days, but I had couldn’t tell for sure because she did like to change things up a bit to get new flavors.
Renge loosened her tie and started unbuttoning her shirt while she waited for the tea to brew, so I instinctively turned the other way.
“It’s okay,” she said giggling. “I don’t mind if you look.”
“Yeah no, I can’t do that,” I said, eyeing her from the side. I caught a glimpse of her fine features, like her silky smooth skin and of course her breasts, but what really caught my eye was the small atomizer she wore around her neck. Inside that bottle was a small crystal that floated within all the liquid.
“Is that your specialized weapon?” I asked.
“Yeah. You heard about my [World] before, right?” she said proudly. “Here, I’ll show you it.”
Renge was a bit too proud of her [World], but I was also interested in seeing it in action. There hadn’t been a lot of opportunities for me to see other people’s [Worlds] after I was transferred from the military.
“Alright, let’s see it.”
“Feast your eyes on my [World],” she boasted.
She grabbed the atomizer and sprayed the empty air in front of her. The mist from it was glittery and sparkly, and she stepped right into it just as it began to diffuse into the air. The droplets seemed to bounce off her body with a sweet flagrance.
Once that was taken care of, she went to the herbal plants she brought out earlier and started whispering to them one by one.
“I have a favor to ask…” she whispered gently. “Please, I need you to be sweeter, more refreshing… Even a bit of acidity is fine… Okay? We’re in this together!”
She was like the herb whisperer, since the way she spoke made it seem like they were best buddies. I knew from before that Renge’s [World] was more like an appeal since she couldn’t converse like Asagao could. Nevertheless, her [World] did seem to get them on her side.
“Alright!” she said, standing up. She was satisfied.
“Was that it?”
“Yup, it’s all good now. It’s all up to them how they’ll respond, so I’ll keep a close eye on them… but for today, I have this!”
She took out a container from the fridge that had different types of herbs.
I clapped sarcastically. “Wow, that’s amazing. But you know what’s more amazing? If you had just brought that out from the beginning…”
“This isn’t something that can be bought just like that, so when I use them I have to get new ones prepared as well,” she said. She fired up the stove and put in the herbs.

As usual, she made the tea slightly differently than the one she made last time, and it wasn't long before its refreshing fragrance started to fill the air. Renge then took out a spoon and tried a sip, and instantly I could tell that she was satisfied with it.

"Here," she said, handing me the spoon. "You try this too!"

I took a step back. "Err, I'm good… My tongue gets burned easily…"

She didn't have to use the same spoon, right? And why do I need to taste it?

While those thoughts crossed my mind, she blew on the spoon a few times. Once it was relatively cooled down, she handed it to me again.

"Fine then, here!" she said. She took a few steps towards me and grinned. There was no way I could refuse now. There was also no way I could stop looking at her slightly exposed breasts, but I'd rather not mention that right now.

“I hope with my [World] it actually does make it taste better…” she said softly. She timidly scratched her reddened cheeks and smiled once again. There was no way I could look away from that, so I did the next best thing and closed my eyes while I took the sip.
“Yup, it’s good.”
“Nice!”
Honestly, I couldn’t really tell if it tasted good or not. I did, however, like its sweet and refreshing aroma— it loosened my body nicely.
Perhaps this tea was the secret to having nice and relaxing meetings…
Our impromptu tea time flowed nicely into the meeting that followed, and soon even that was over. Normally I would head home only to be shamed into doing overtime by Urushibara, but he was not here to stop me today. Plus, everyone was already tired from earlier, so I guess that was why we could all go home early.
With my work out of the way, it was finally time for me to do my own thing. I did tell Asagao I would find out why Natsume transferring people, so right now would be the perfect time to take care of that.
I quickly walked through the city. It was already nighttime, and the dry air made me shiver, so I put on my jacket and dipped into a back alley. Our dark uniforms were surprisingly good at helping blend in the dark. They were perfect in situations where I had to stay out of the spotlight… like right now.
There was no way I was going to be spotted sneaking to Natsume’s luxurious mansion, so the jacket was a must. Once I was there, I carefully snuck around and propped my ear onto the wall. I also needed to get information about what the military was up to, especially more about her movements, so I had no choice but to do this.
Yes, I knew that listening in on a girl’s room was a great sin, but it was just too easy to do with my [World]. After all, I could hear the voices of all things no matter where they were. There could be a billion things in they way and I could still hear it just fine.
That was just the nature of my [World]. Sure it defied the laws of physics, but that was just how [Worlds] were.
In any case, I started my usual ritual that I did every time I tapped into it. It wasn’t anything fancy like how Asagao touched her Qualidea Code with one hand and her specialized weapon with another since I didn’t even need a weapon in the first place. Unlike hers and many others, my [World] was always activated and always present with me.
That’s why unlike most people, I didn’t have to bring out my [World], but rather had to narrow it down. Instead of accelerating, I had to slow down. Usually this was all that I had to do, even during battles, but this time was different. I didn’t just need to slow down— I needed to stop completely. That was the kind of image I had to put in my head.

Luckily, I had just the right item to help me do that. I took out an aspirin and popped it into my mouth. Soon, I began to get more out of touch with my [World]… I guess this was my routine.
With that, I could release the limits I had put on myself, but now I needed absolute control over my [World]. I took a deep breath and slowly breathed out, focusing on the pill that I just swallowed. Starting from the sound of the pill dissolving in my own body, other sounds from all directions began to pour into me.
I heard my blood flowing, my heart beating, then the wind blowing, the leaves rustling, then came the footsteps, water flowing through the pipes, then a chime, whistling, the sound of water, a keypad being pressed, a knock on the door, the rustling of clothes, the elevator, the motorcycle, the door, and finally a cough, then a voice, then a conversation.
But it wasn't just the conversation I heard. No, far from it. Noises from every direction imaginable came in from every way, shape, and form that it began to get unbelievably annoying. It was as if I was wandering within a giant mush of noise that was shaking me to my very core. Because I felt every inch of that mush, I could feel how vast it really was.
And then I could feel the pain. First came the headache that came in like a shock. It was an extremely sharp pain, but then it transitioned into more of a soreness in my head. Normally, I wouldn't have this kind of pain even during battles, but this time I was trying to hear *everything*. I had to absorb and identify every single sound within the vicinity so I could hear what I really wanted to hear. Because of that, the burden on my body was many times more than usual.
If I had to describe it, it was as if I was looking at randomized strings of letters and numbers that were constantly being updated on the screen. Instead of appearing line by line, these strings appeared all over with different fonts and colors. They would constantly appear and disappear without notice, and some were even upside down. Many would flow across the screen and then pop out or disappear.
I focused all my energy to find a very specific letter. Even if I could hear all the sounds physically, I didn't have the mental fortitude to process them at the speed they were coming in to me. As a result, doing this for long periods of time was detrimental to me both physically and mentally, so I had to finish this up quickly.
Surprisingly, it wasn't long before I heard her voice. Perhaps it had gone quicker because I was so used to her voice from the countless times I had heard it in the past.
"Natsume, did that go alright?" I heard a voice ask her.
I could tell that whoever said that was not in a good mood just from her tone alone. Her sluggishness made me think it was black-eyes.
"Yeah, it did. Sorry for dragging you into all of this," a female voice responded.

There was no doubt about it— this voice belonged to Natsume. If there was anyone she would talk about her plans to, it would be black-eyes and no one else.
In any case, this wasn't the time for my mind to wander off. I finally reached Natsume's voice, so I had to concentrate on listening to her. Seeing that I was already barely holding on, any unnecessary thoughts would be a disaster.
Unfortunately, it seemed like their conversation was wrapping up.
"I really am sorry," said Natsume said timidly. "I should have been there from the start, but to be honest I didn't really know what to say… I just had to wing it."
Black-eyes laughed. "You don't need to apologize. Besides, we could have handled it fine without you, so don't worry about it."
"Yeah, I think so too, but Asagao is pretty stubborn so who knows. Though I am glad I could actually scare her a little bit…"
"There's no way they would continue doing those dumb things after what we did, right?"
"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Natsume said. She spoke like she was giving Asagao praise. "She's always been strong."
Black-eyes quietened up. She was probably rethinking Asagao's strength considering what she just heard.
"But," said Natsume, trying to change the topic. "If she tries it again, we'll crush her again. Simple as that."
She spoke with such ferocity that it was hard to believe that she had been doubting herself earlier. Black-eyes didn't seem to notice this change in behavior. Instead, it seemed she was concerned about something else.
"But that…" she said with a sigh. "I just can't understand you after you say all that."
"Really? What… can't you understand?"
"You seem to be really close with her, but at the same time you also seem to hate her guts."
"It's not that I'm close with her," said Natsume. "I just want to do things the right way. As the subhead I have a certain standard I have to adhere to."
"Ah, and in the military, that standard is to beat the hell out of her right? So you do hate her, huh."
"No! We have to be fair and treat everyone equally…"
"Equally? Aren't you giving her special treatment, though?"
"I-I'm not! I just hate how she's doing this. It's way too early for her to lead anything."
"Ah, I see," said black-eyes. "Yeah, she's powerless to change anything."
"But I don't disagree with her…"
"Yeah, I feel you. Wait, sorry… no I don't. What do you mean?"
"Exactly what I said," replied Natsume, reverting back to her timid form. "I want everyone to live equally… I mean, aren't we all part of the same city? I want us all to be a happy family."

Natsume sighed. “But,” she continued, actually sounding a little depressed.”My older sister Kayane changed the system. Anyone useless was abandoned, and only the strong were promoted… Because of that we were able to compete with Tokyo and Kanagawa, but I feel like we’ve lost something very important in the process.”
“Hmm… Didn’t you kick a fair amount of people out, though?”
“No! I was transferring them away. They were all my friends… and will continue to be, even if we were no longer in the same institution.”
“Sounds like the same thing to me…” joked black-eyes.
Natsume paused— I could only imagine her pout. She took a moment to think about things, then spoke.
“I’ve always wondered why everybody’s [Worlds] are so different. Mine is suited for the battlefield, and that’s why I fight, but there are many of those who aren’t. But I’m not the only one fighting… *everyone* is one way or another. That’s why it leaves a bad taste in my mouth when I see how much more power we have. So, if everyone’s in the military, then we’ll all be equal, right?”
“Ah sure, sure. Yes, I see,” murmured black-eyes.
“You don’t sound like you do!” shouted Natsume.
The two paused before bursting out into laughter. Natsume was a good person and she certainly wasn’t foolish. She wanted change, but knew she couldn’t do it at the moment.
“Right now I’m quite limited in what I could do because I’m just a subhead,” she continued, “but if I can slowly get the other branches to work together, then I truly believe that one day we’ll be able to look past the branches we’re stationed in and unite as one.”
Natsume spoke directly from her heart. Even though she was the most powerful fighter with full control over the military, she still strove for peace. She sure was quite the idealist, just like Asagao. The two both had aggressive dreams of their own, but Natsume’s was on a whole new level. Asagao only wanted to change the system and how points were distributed. On the other hand, Natsume wanted us all to change from within. She wanted us to get along with each other and view each other as equals. There was no way Natsume’s wish could come true— at least not in any of our lifetimes. Her way of thinking was too naive, seeing that people were always against even the smallest of changes. The world wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows. There was no way everyone could become that accepting.
“Natsume, wow…” said a concerned black-eyes.
“Yeah, I guess I still have a long way to go…”
“Wow, that’s amazing! What a perfect plan. That means I can actually start going out with people from other branches right? Sick, I’m gonna have a blast! The guys here are such idiots, but going out with guys from other branches seems to be a step down for me no matter how good looking they are.”

Natsume chuckled. “What? That’s what you’re thinking of?” she said. “Well, whatever… We’ll see how it goes first… I guess…”
Natsume sounded a bit depressed when she said that last part. It almost sounded like she didn’t expect herself to go through with it and had already given up.
My heart sank upon hearing that, and my breathing became more labored to the point where it became hard for me to breathe. I had to take a deep breath to bring things back under control.
It was already hard enough to tap into my [World] like this, so I didn’t want to get emotional to make things even more difficult, but I couldn’t help myself after hearing her words. My fingers began to get wobbly and sweaty, and it was only a matter of seconds before I lost focus.
Despite that, I understood what she was up to, so my work here was done. It was time to get out of of here. I was starting to feel the backlash from overusing my powers too… It wasn’t long before I would be unable to hold myself together from all the pain that would inevitably come. The last thing I wanted to do was to get caught snooping around in that state.
I quickly made my way out while trying to get some more pills from my pocket. My hand was trembling so much that it was hard to actually grab them out, but eventually I managed to do so and quickly threw them in my mouth. It didn’t matter how many I took or whether or not I was supposed to take them since I just needed *something*. Physically, I didn’t think the pills had an immediate effect, but they did wonders for me mentally thanks to the placebo effect. Just the act of taking the pills was enough to keep me sane for now.
The [World] I envisioned was where every single sound could be heard naturally. Because of that, once I tapped into it, I didn’t have to put in any effort to be able to hear those sounds. Even picking up on a ton of noises at once was not a problem for me— in the physical sense, anyway.
The very act of tapping in and out of that [World] to find very specific sounds put a huge toll on my mental state. There was nothing in my [World] that could help me tap in and out, so my mind had no choice but shoulder that burden. Once that happened, my body would go haywire to indicate that something went wrong with my mind.
Even so, it was a blessing that it didn’t affect me on a day to day basis. According to some medical personnel, human bodies were surprisingly durable, even more so with the help of [Worlds] strengthening them both mentally and physically. That, combined with all the training we received for our powers, really lessened the damage done. With that being said, determining how much restraint was needed before the breaking point was really annoying.
At this point, I was done. I vomited my heart out and trudged along the wall. Even with the wall as support, it was hard to walk with since I had chills running up and down my body and a headache so painful it was messing

with my vision. Still, I hurried back as fast as I could, even if it meant I had to drift in and out of consciousness.
—
Perhaps it was the side effects wearing off or my pills actually doing their job, but the pain resided enough for me to crawl back to my room. Instead of having the strength to simply walk through the door, I leaned on the knob and just collapsed as the door opened.
“Hey, what happened…?” I heard. I struggled to lift my head up, but once I did, I saw Asuha’s worried face staring straight at me. “Hey!”
“O-Oh hey… I’m home…” I responded, trying my hardest not to throw up. I wondered why she came to my place today.
Before I could say any more, Asuha rushed to my side. She lifted me up from the back and gently touched my forehead. We locked eyes— I could see that she was on the verge of crying. Just seeing her face like that made my day a lot better, so I guess that’s one good thing to come out of this.
However, her expression turned on the angry side the moment she realized what I did. “Did you use that…?” she asked. Unlike her usual indifferent self, she was really pushing for an answer.
“W-Well… You know…” I tried not to answer her question directly.
But Asuha had heard enough. She grabbed my collar and shouted, “You idiot! What were you thinking?”
This wasn’t the first time she yelled at me for overusing my powers. The last time was probably when I had used the very same thing for the military entrance exams. Seeing her in this state because of what I did made me swore never to use it except under extreme circumstances.
Yet, here I am. I made her cry again. I made her angry at me again. Even in my hazy mental state, these thoughts were as clear as day to me.
My body wouldn’t budge, so Asuha dragged me all the way to the sofa and hoisted me up on top of it. Even though I wasn’t seeing straight, I could catch glimpses of her face looking right at me and could feel her warm breath blowing against my face.
“You didn’t have to drag me all the way to the sofa…”
“Yeah I did,” she shot back. She took out a cold towel from a nearby cabinet and lightly placed it on my forehead.
Illustration
“It hurts me every time I see you in this state… so please don’t do it again…”
“Ah, sorry…”
“I even said the exact same thing last time!”
“It’s okay, it’s okay…” I said weakly. My head was still throbbing with pain, but I managed to crack a smile. “I wasn’t going all out. Besides, I had never gone all out in my life, and I don’t plan to do so anytime soon.”
Asuha wasn’t having any of it. “No, it’s not fine!” she shouted out, once again on the verge of crying.

Her sudden outburst was loud enough to make my head ring, and that caused me to wince back in pain.
“Oh, sorry…” she said softly.
I couldn’t bear to see her like this any longer, so in the calmest voice possible, I said, “Really, I’m okay. Forgive me this time… I’ll be much more careful next time.”
Asuha patted my head. “Please try not to have a next time…”
I reached out and held her hand to try to calm her down. “Once I sleep for a bit, I’ll be all better…”
“Alright.”
“So you can head home now.”
“If you say so…” said Asuha, but she didn’t move an inch.
I thought that maybe she was waiting for me to sleep, so I closed my eyes in an effort to stress that everything really was okay.
But nothing was okay. The wave of pain started to come again, and all sorts of noises once again reverberated throughout my entire body. I could feel them bouncing around in my head and scratching at my skull. They were going up and down my nervous system, shaking my organs as they went.
I bit down hard on my teeth to help stabilize myself through all the pain and discomfort. As I did, Asuha went down and gently covered both my ears with her hands. She delicately stretched her fingers around my head and ran them down my cheek.
With just her simple gesture aided by the warmth of her fingers, the violent noises within me faded away to nothing and all my unpleasant feelings were gone in an instant. I even felt like I was was floating around on a cloud. My eyes got droopy, and a blanket of warmth began spreading throughout my cold body— I was finally at peace and I could finally relax.
It wasn’t long before I had drifted into the sleep I so longed for. However, before I was completely knocked out, I heard her whisper a few words into my ear.
This is the least I could do for you.

Chapter 4: The Battlefield as a Front

Part 1

When I woke up, Asuha was already gone. I did vaguely recall hearing her run out and slamming the door as I drifted into consciousness, so perhaps she really was by my side the whole time.

Once I was fully awake, I smelled the sweet and savory aroma of a recently cooked pot of stew coming from the kitchen. Naturally, I made my way there and helped myself to some.

Thanks, Asuha.

I felt great. It could have been from the fact that she helped me sleep better than I ever did before, or that her stew was so good and refreshing. In any case, I was even ready for another day at work.

My first course of action was to report everything to Asagao. The moment I walked into our usual meeting room, I immediately raised my hand and stated I had something to report, beating even Urushibara who was always the first to start.

“I can’t tell you where I got the information from, but I finally understand what Natsume’s been up to.”

I didn’t exactly sound trustworthy, and to them it could very well seem like I was making stuff up, but I told them everything that I had picked up on yesterday. I told them why Natsume was transferring people out instead of just firing them and her grand plan of creating a world where everyone would be treated as equals.

I spoke as objectively as possible like any good reporter.

“Sounds like something she would do,” Asagao murmured to herself, turning to me. “Thanks for this. If we can understand their true motives, then we can better plan for our side of things.”

I nodded in response. However, Renge and Urushibara didn’t seem to get what I said.

“What was that, Chigusa?” snapped Urushibara. “Can you not mutter as much? The information you told us was all over the place, and don’t even get me started on your report. Can you at least give us a summary? With a clearer voice this time?”

Don’t blame me just because you suck at listening comprehension…

Maybe blaming people was all that he could do. I did a mental shrug and carried on.

“A summary, you say?” I said. “Basically, Natsume wants us all to be in the military one way or another.”

“Ah, she wants to do that? I see, I never really thought of that, but isn’t that pretty much impossible to pull off?” Urushibara said with a chuckle.

Renge seemed to agree with him as well. Surprisingly, the two understood the absurdity of what Natsume was going for.

“If that really is what she wants, though,” said Renge. “I think it’s great…”
Renge cut herself off once she realized she was praising the enemy, but Asagao just laughed.
“Ever since she was little, she always wanted to bring everyone together,” sneered Asagao. “Even if she became the boss of a bunch of thugs like she is now, after hearing that, she will always be an idiot.”
Asagao seemed vindictive after hearing what I had to say— I guess she expected more after wondering why Natsume kept burdening her with transfers all this time.
“And what kind of reasoning is that?” she continued, clenching her fists angrily. “All pretentiousness aside, isn’t she just too scared to fire her own people? If she can’t even do that, then she has no business being a leader! She really is an idiot! A naive idiot!”
Maybe I should tell her to stop calling Natsume an idiot… It really makes her sound childish and immature.
“Hmmph. I bet all she can do is just keep saying that family nonsense…”
I guess that’s what I could expect from childhood friends, since they really do suit each other well.
“Hey, at least she’s not like her sister,” said Urushibara. “At the very least, she has good intentions, and she seems to be looking out for the little guys.”
It was pretty ironic to hear Urushibara say that, seeing that he certainly did not look for the little guys like me.
“Yeah, I agree,” nodded Renge. “Natsume is really nice to me too…”
Renge smiled. She could have gone on and on about Natsume, but decided to stop there.
“Asagao, shouldn’t you have a nice long talk with Natsume, now?” Urushibara chimed in.
Asagao shrugged in return. “Easier said than done. Besides, if we could actually discuss stuff, we wouldn’t be in the mess we are in now,” she said.
She sighed and gloomily stared out the window— perhaps she was thinking of the past. “We already understand each other, but since we don’t see eye to eye on things, there’s nothing we can do…”
She sounded like she didn’t want to admit what she said was true. In fact, she sounded exactly like how Natsume sounded last night. Both spoke nostalgically with even a hint of regret in their voices.
“We just can’t…” finished Asagao.
It was hard to tell whether Asagao blamed herself or Natsume for her current predicament, as it seemed to have been a bit of both. The two were both afraid of taking a step towards each other, resulting in a great divide between them.
However, she quickly caught herself feeling down, so she changed up her expression and cheerfully said, “In any case, we just got to keep going for it! Kasumi, if you have some free time, help Renge out too please.”
“I don’t have any free time, though…” I whispered under my breath. “You of all people should know how much I have on my plate…”

I had been working for her long enough that I knew what she asked for was more of an order rather than a request. That's just how she was.
"Why can't you help out too?" I snapped back to her.
Asagao smugly swung her hair back. "I have very important lessons to do. I will be way too far behind if I take even a day out of my schedule."
"You're on quite the high horse, aren't you…" I muttered.
Well, things were supposed to be like this. She was the idol, after all.
—
With that, I suddenly found myself wheeling a cart full of gifts. Asagao made it sound like Renge needed my help, but right now I was nothing more than a pack mule. On the other hand, Renge was carrying her own personal bag.
"Your bag looks pretty heavy…" I said. "Wanna put it in the cart?"
"Nah, I'm good!" she replied with a smile. "Thanks for helping me out, though!"
"Well, work is work."
I didn't consider myself doing her a favor since those weren't my thing, but Renge just laughed.
"Work, huh? Kasumi, you must love work so much. I mean, that's all you talk about…"
"What? Hell no, work can go screw itself."
Renge was confused by my words. "Then… why do you work?"
"So I can actually retire," I replied. It was a bit embarrassing to say that, so I decided to shoot her a question of my own. "You work pretty hard too, right? Why? Do you like it?"
"Me?" Renge was caught off guard with my question. "Well, I guess I want to find happiness… I think?"
I found her answer so ridiculous it actually rendered me speechless for a few moments. "You won't find happiness working here, that's for sure."
"I mean… sure, I won't deny that… but… maybe I just like being with you all!"
"Yeah, but you're still *working*… you're better off somewhere else other than this hellhole."
"Sure, that's your opinion, but I told you I like working! I always love doing my best!"
Renge essentially went against everything I stood for, and she was even smiling while doing it.
"I mean…" her voice trailed off. "I like people who work hard too," she said timidly.
In my opinion, words were nothing but tools. There was a clear difference between whether these tools were useful or not depending on how they were being used. Things like vocabulary, tones, or even pronunciations all had an effect on how effective the tools were.
Renge was one of the best when it came to lobbying for us— precisely because she could use these tools well. That was why when she said that, I

didn’t really think there was any particularly deep meanings or purpose to her words, so I just brushed it off. In my mind, she was just saying things.
“I guess I don’t hate it completely,” I said. “It is fun being with you.”
Renge’s eyes widened as she blushed a bit. “Me? Why?”
“Well, people like you, which makes negotiations go that much faster. And I love it when things move along like that.”
“Oh…” said Renge. “But really? People actually like me?”
She really didn’t seem to believe what I said. “T-That’s not true!” she continued, waving her hands around frantically. “That can’t be true at all!”
It sure was. I don’t know anyone more beloved than you.
Renge continued to deny it as she shook her head, despite the fact that I hadn’t said anything else. “There’s no way people like me at all… I mean, I got kicked out of the military! Right?”
She laughed nervously.
“You didn’t get kicked out— you got *transferred*,” I said. “Besides, Natsume’s nice enough to not kick anyone out, right?“
“Yeah, she’s kind to me, even though I’m so useless…” she replied shyly.
It was hard to tell whether or not she was serious, even though she looked a bit depressed saying that. For all I knew she could just be messing with me… I guess there’s just not a whole lot I can do about that.
“Isn’t it good enough to be useful working in the manufacturing branch?” I said. I gave up trying to read her, so I just said what came to my mind.
“Everyone, from the higher ups to your coworkers, all like you anyway.”
“I mean… Y-Yeah, that makes me happy…” she replied with a touch of embarrassment, but that didn’t stop her from walking up close to me. “But what do you think, Kasumi? Do you like me?”
I could feel her warm breath, and her usual sweet fragrance tickled my nose a bit. Even though I wasn’t making eye contact with her, I knew she was very close to me.
“It sure looks that way to other people, doesn’t it? I replied, unable to even turn in her general direction. “I think…”
That just made Renge more persistent. This time, she pulled on my arm.
“Who cares about what others think… I just want to know what you think… please?”
Her voice shot through the air and gently coaxed its way right into me. This really wasn’t a question I wanted to answer, but her voice was so persuasive I almost felt compelled to do so. She was like a siren urging me on.
“Uhh…”
I instinctively felt the need to get away from her, so I hurried on into the building.
—
The atmosphere inside the trade building was tense. There were multiple high profile trade members already sitting down across from us, and they weren’t looking too pleasant. Surely the upbeat attitude they had during the fruits party was long gone by now.

Our appointment was set up through Renge's old friends from the military that had transferred here, so it wasn't like we randomly barged in or anything, but it sure looked like we did.
Renge took out a large thermos from the bag she had been carrying and poured out a few cups of her tea.
"Here, help yourselves," she said, addressing them. "This is something we created recently."
"O-Oh, thanks," they replied. They seemed a little hesitant to take it at first, but tensions seemed to lower once they took their first sip. It wasn't long before they began some small talk with her— talking mostly about tea in general. They threw around words like "organic" and "natural," but since I wasn't too familiar with tea, I couldn't follow the conversation at all.
One of the members chuckled, so the conversation must have been heading in the right direction. I trusted that this was all part of Renge's plan where they were eased into our actual topics through her tea and small talk.
"So, about the thing we came here for…"
"Y-Yes, go on ahead…" one of them said, but it was clear that they were uncomfortable with proceeding.
"If you stand with us, we'll… umm…" her voice trailed off. Renge was certainly more shy than usual, and it didn't take a genius to understand why she was like that. The image of being absolutely powerless against the military must have been on everyone's minds, and there was always the possibility that Natsume had already started pressuring them personally.
"If I may, maybe we shouldn't change the system that worked so far…" interrupted the head of the trade branch. "The military is far too important for us as a whole."
"O-Oh… Is that how you all feel?" Renge said gloomily.
"Ah, no, not like that," he said, backpedaling. "I was just playing the devil's advocate… We're still deliberating ourselves, so hopefully with this meeting we can decide on what to do."
It was the biggest non-answer ever. I supposed all he was concerned about was aligning with the winning side when everything was over.
If that was the case, then Renge needed a miracle to get them fully on our side. I started to speak, but Renge spoke out before I had a chance to say anything.
"But still, that's the whole point we are doing this," she said. "Haven't we had enough? If we don't act now, who knows if we would ever get another chance…"
Renge's voice got quieter and quieter as she spoke, which just made them listen more intently. Her shoulders trembled and she was fighting off tears, but she still looked straight into their eyes.
"Please lend me your power," she finished with a single tear rolling down her cheek.
The members were all rendered speechless. The looked at each other confused, unaware of what to do. It was no longer a negotiation— it

probably never was, as it was more like an emotional plea that they couldn't turn down.
And that's exactly where we made our move.
"Tsurube has great hopes for the trade branch, so please take that into consideration," I said with a bow. I took all the presents I had wheeled in earlier and laid them out on the table.
The manager nodded. "I-I see. I can't see why not, so we'll—"
"Really? So you'll help us out?" interrupted Renge.
"Sure… I mean, we will still tread carefully."
I wasn't sure if it was Renge's tears or the presents that had pushed him to our side, but it really didn't matter to me since our work here was done. We both bowed respectfully, shook hands with the crew, and left the building in silence. It wasn't until we were outside that Renge finally let out a big sigh of relief.
"Nice work back there," I said.
Renge facepalmed with both her hands. "T-Thanks. Even now I still feel embarrassed, though…"
I couldn't help but chuckle hearing that. "Don't be like that," I said sincerely. "We got exactly what we came here for because of that."
I didn't usually compliment people genuinely like that, but this time I really meant it.
"I guess so," Renge said with a smile. "Thanks, I appreciate you saying that. I got through because of you."
I shrugged to keep my composure. "Alright," I said, trying to change the topic. "Let's head on back."
"Sorry! I'm about to meet up with some of my old friends… Do you want to come to, Kasumi?"
"Maybe next time. Tell them I said hi."
I actually didn't want to go, so I used my nifty "maybe next time" phrase to dodge her invitation. Not even Renge could pull me from that.
"O-Oh… Alright then," she replied. "I'll be sure to let you know next time!"
She hoisted up her bag and waved me goodbye before heading back to the city. There was no doubt in my mind that she was going to show them the tea she was so proud of. In any case, I started to roll the now empty cart back to the office.
There wasn't any time to waste. It was time to do overtime.
—
Renge continued to lobby behind the scenes just as Asagao continued with her idol work. She didn't perform in just one location, either. We had a portable stage that we could bring to essentially anywhere in the city and use that to hold performances.
Of course, the military continued to thwart our efforts. However, every time they came, Urushibara and his fellow wizards would bravely stall for time as Asagao snuck her way out. This kind of "guerrilla warfare" only brought

Asagao and Natsume further and further apart until they were on completely opposite sides of the political spectrum.
As a result, Chiba was split into two sides: one under Asagao, and one under Natsume. Natsume's side became the conservative party, and they made it clear that safety was the number one priority for the city. On the other hand, Asagao combined with the other branches to form the revolutionists. As their name suggested, they wanted to bring change to Chiba.
As with all elections, the two parties ran their own negative smear campaigns against the other. For example, on Natsume's side they pushed the narrative that if Asagao was elected, Chiba would be unable to defend itself from anything, while on Asagao's side they insisted that a government under Natsume would mean a life of being exploited by power hungry dictators.
The two parties continued to viciously attack each other until even the students were getting tired of their politics. However, just when things were about to get out of hand if it hadn't already, it was soon time for their first debate.
Things were tense in the debate room right off the bat. Despite that, I wasn't particularly nervous as I sipped Renge's tea in our preparation room beforehand. She had ramped up production of her newly developed tea just in time to give it to everyone who came to watch. Asagao had also ordered us to distribute other refreshments and even some of her goods. It was nothing more than a shameless attempt to garner cheap support from the crowd.
On the other hand, the military did no such thing.
"Umm… I have a dream," Renge said, reading off of a manuscript with a shaky voice. We were going through everything we could until the very last minute. "For Chiba, by Chiba…"
"No!" Urushibara shouted. "You need to speak with more emotion! Don't be so monotone! You need to be able to leave an impact and believe in the power of your words! Repeat after me! FOR CHIBA! BY CHIBA! CHIBAAA!"
"R-Repeat after me…"
"You don't say that! Starting from FOR CHIBA! I want to hear your passion and emotion! Right now I can't even hear you, so speak louder!"
Urushibara went crazy trying to show her the same passion he had, causing him to sweat uncontrollably. This only got Renge even more flustered.
Unlike those two, Asagao was also calmly sipping some tea on the sofa.
"Asagao, you sure are really relaxed right now," I said, taking a seat next to her.
"Is that how it looks to you? I am pretty nervous, you know."
She smiled as she gave a nod indicating her hands. I took a look and indeed, they were trembling a bit.
"Right? I'm just acting all calm and stuff but I'm freaking out in the inside."
"Well, that's natural. I mean, it could be worse. Remember the first time you got on stage? You were practically crying," I said with a chuckle.

“Hey now, I’d like to see you try…”
“But you managed to do it. You didn’t do it well, but you did it.”
“I can’t tell if that’s a compliment or not…” pouted Asagao. She swung her face away, and in the process her front bangs fell back onto her forehead. Through her scattered bangs I could see that she was still eyeing me from the side. “But…” she whispered. “Because of that performance… no, even before that, because of all of us, I was able to get to where I am today. That’s why, it’s going to be alright. You have my gratitude, Kasumi.”
Asagao blushed and reached out her hand for a handshake. It was slender and pale, almost as if all the color had been drained from it, but I reached out as well and shook it. I knew her hand was far from weak.
“This all came from your hard work, you know. I’m only here as a producer.”
“You’re absolutely right on that. It takes a lot to be an idol,” she said, giving me a cheeky little grin. She smiled differently than she would in front of an audience, but it was just as passionate.
If she could put out that kind of smile backstage, I couldn’t imagine what she was capable of doing in front of an audience. She was on her way to becoming the best idol that had ever existed.
“Asagao! Let’s do your hair and makeup!” shouted Urushibara.
We quickly finished up our handshake and I peeked inside the dresser room. Renge was already inside styling her hair and making sure her smile went along with her lipstick. She sprayed some perfume around her as well. Since she was the first speaker of the debate, I guess she had to be the first one to get ready.
“Alright, time to go. See you later.”
“Take care,” I replied.
Asagao waved me goodbye and made her way to the dressing room.

Part 2

There was a control room that handled the acoustics and displays in the back of the assembly hall where the debate took place. The two sides each approved of one person to oversee it for the sake of fairness, and on Asagao’s side that person happened to be me.
Once I opened the door into the dimmed room, Asuha was already inside looking at me with her phone in her hands. She probably heard my footsteps coming in, but she was still surprised to see that it was me.
“H-Hey,” she called out.
“What are you doing here? Helping Natsume out?”
“Yeah, I think so…” she said without an ounce of emotion before quickly turning back to her phone.
She was probably here because Natsume didn’t want any funny business happening, though it seemed like she had no idea on what to do. Well, I guess it was our job to make sure everything went smoothly, so it’s not like we had to do anything special.

I took a seat in the sofa up front where I could see most of the action. Once I did, Asuha came over as well and lied down next to me. It really did feel like we were right at home.
In time the staff came running up which marked the start of the debate. Fireworks accompanied the rock music that came blasting on, and the spotlights turned on just in time to shine on the confetti and balloons being shot out. At last, the announcer officially declared that the debate had begun.
The first introductory speech belonged to our group. I said speech, but it was more like an opportunity for us to hype up the crowd in our favor. It didn't seem like there was any need to, however, since the crowd was already applauding before anyone had stepped onto the podium. Asagao had chosen Renge to do this, so it was her who walked up first.
Renge walked with confidence and style— it was hard to believe she was on the verge of breaking down earlier. That confidence bled into cloud, making them cheer harder with each step she took. I couldn't help but notice her jet black hair once again with her pure white skin.
She waved her hand out to thank the crowd for being so supportive before walking up to the podium. Once there, she took a dramatic pause to ensure that everyone was completely focused on her before speaking.
"I have a dream…" she started to say without once looking at her notes or the teleprompter. She was completely focused on the audience. "That one day, people will not be defined merely by the branch they were in, but rather who they were as a person. A day where the barrier between branches was broken down, and the shackles that binded them lifted."
Renge spoke like how she had walked, with confidence. She loudly projected her voice all throughout the room, and the nervousness she had during rehearsals earlier had been completely wiped away. Her voice was soothing and relaxing, enough to instantly draw anyone in.
However, Renge suddenly took a pause in the middle of her speech and silently hung her head down in sadness. It was so unexpected that the audience started murmuring among themselves in an effort to find out what was going on. That seemed to be the signal she was waiting for, as she suddenly shouted her next words.
"But! That dream… That dream I have… Is about to be taken from us!"
The overhead lights dimmed just as she said that and the projector started to blast a video. The video showed some slightly intoxicated students eating fruits and drinking from champagne glasses.
Upon seeing that, I instantly ran up to the operator table and said, "Stop that video."
The operator shook his head. "Umm… I'm afraid I can't do that… I was asked to play this, and you know I was hesitant about doing it, but they really insisted on it… I have no choice, man."
"Yes you do. Stop it."
I forcefully took over the controls and tried to do it myself.

“H-Hey, what are you doing?!?”
The video switched to the next scene where it showed footage of the forbidden alcohol being made and it being handed as a gift to some other branches.
As you all can see, Tsurube Asagao made alcohol that was explicitly banned by the Administration Bureau, and used that as bribes to further her agenda.
Renge’s voice turned emotionless when she started to coldheartedly accuse Asagao of multiple crimes. As a result, a commotion brewed in the audience.
My first priority was to cut the video and the microphone, but to do that I had to get the operator out of the way. I tried to push him completely off the table, but someone came in and grabbed me on the shoulder.
“I’m afraid you can’t do that, Chigusa, he said. “Just stay still and don’t move a muscle.”
“Who are you?”
“We used to be coworkers… I transferred out too, so I guess we are now fellow transfers.”
He was a fairly big guy, big enough that I couldn’t just simply brush him off, but I tried to anyway. As I was doing so, I heard an even louder commotion coming from the stage.
Do you have something to say, Tsurube Asagao?
I turned just in time to see a bunch of students forcibly dragging Asagao and Urushibara onto the podium. The two were clearly confused out of their minds. Right now, I was just as confused as they were.
“Renge… W-What, why…? What’s going on… why are you… Please stop…” Asagao said in shock, wiping her tears away. She was close enough for the mic to pick up on what she said, blasting her voice throughout the venue.
On the other hand, the mic wasn’t close enough to hear what Urushibara was saying, but it was evident that he was shouting and fighting his way out. I noticed that anything Asagao related around the two were smashed to bits, and even the audience was starting to turn on them.
As I just stood there dumbfounded, I felt the guy behind me tighten his grip on my shoulder.
“You’re part of them too, right?” he said. “Come with me.”
“Wait a second!” shouted Asuha as she jumped up from the couch and went to stop him.
I wondered if the commotion here was finally loud enough to wake her up. In any case, I suddenly felt something cold press against the back of my head. It didn’t take a genius to know what that was.
Seeing this, Asuha stopped right in her tracks and shot him a dirty look. “I thought weapons were banned in here,” she said, raising both her hands in defeat.

“Oh really? My apologies, then,” he replied. He motioned at us to move out with his gun still pointed at me. “Chigusa Asuha, you also need to come as well.”
I had no choice but to oblige, so I went with him all the way down to the main floor. At this point, the audience had completely turned against Asagao. Words couldn’t describe the hatred they had towards her, but their rage could certainly be felt.
However, there was but one person who went against the grain. “Shut up, everyone!” she yelled angrily. “Have you been deceiving us the whole time, Renge? Seriously, what the fuck are you thinking? I’ll hear your excuses later, so let them go!”
In a fit of rage, Natsume barged onto the stage. Once she got a closer look at Asagao, who was now in handcuffs, she ran to her aid.
Renge immediately got in her way. “Natsume, your hands are also dirty in all this,” she said. “I’m disappointed in you.”
“What the hell are you saying? What do you know??!?”
“These past few months, you forcibly relocated a good portion of the students from the military,” Renge called out to her. “Why is that?”
“Huh? What does that have to do with…” Natsume’s voice trailed off when she saw a bunch of students line up in front of her.
I felt I had seen some of them before.
“You wanted to secretly take over the other branches from the inside, didn’t you?” Renge said as she walked in front of all those people. She turned back to them with a smile. “Isn’t that right, you guys?”
“No I didn’t! I just wanted us to get along better… to break down the barriers between the branches.”
“Oh spare me your lies. You knew the election was coming up, so you ‘transferred’ some of your guys over to secure your victory, right? There’s no better way of strengthening your influence on others.”
Renge and Natsume continued their back and forth without getting anywhere. Natsume vehemently denied every accusation Renge threw her way, but Renge wouldn’t hear any of it. From her tone, I got the feeling that Renge didn’t even care about the truth. Natsume could have been completely right and Renge still wouldn’t budge. She was just cold heartedly brushing her off.
The audience wasn’t any better. Like Renge, they weren’t interested in finding out whether Natsume was actually lying or not. They were just out for blood.
It wasn’t like they were acting unusually. In the face of corruption, people naturally gravitated away from those accused of it. With that, even the strongest could be taken down in the name of ethics and morals.
Natsume clenched her fist. “I told you, I want everyone to get along,” she said depressingly. “We’re all a family…”
“That’s what you think, huh,” said Renge. “But no one else thinks like you… In fact, no one else ever did.”

She marched towards Natsume and whispered something in her ear. Immediately, Natsume shot a frustrated look at Asagao. She then nodded and walked off the stage with Renge.
“Natsume, you’re very kind… and arrogant,” she said, gently massaging Natsume’s shoulders. “So this time, I’ll be *kind* to you.”
She said that and had Natsume taken away before returning back to the stage.
“I have a dream,” she said, continuing her speech. “That one day, everyone could choose their leaders through their own free will. And my dream shall not die today.”
It was clear what she wanted. After all, she just ousted two of the leading candidates in the election, leaving only her left standing on the podium. Her saying “free will” was nothing but a farce. She wanted it all for herself.
A strange sight then began to unfold before my very eyes. Her plea initially resulted in a few hand claps, but in the blink of an eye, those few claps turned into a thunderous applause with endless cheers on the side. The audience had to have been completely mesmerized by her speech in order for her to get that much support that quickly.
Even though it was happening right in front of me, it didn’t make sense. Her speech was neither motivating nor powerful, and it wasn’t even well spoken. It would be hard to imagine a crowd being hyped up for that, much less a crowd so devoted to her as they were right now.
Yet it did happen, which brings me to only one conclusion— her [World]. The [World] that she saw slowly seeped its way into reality, turning fiction into fact through phenomenons that should never have been possible in the first place.
But with the existence of [Worlds], that sort of thing happened right in front of me.
—
We were taken into the closest thing Chiba had to a prison and were even forced into white straightjackets. I was in my own cell, with Asuha in the one across from me.
It wasn’t long before I heard Renge walking in. I knew it was her because I had been with her long enough to know what her footsteps sounded like. I motioned to Asuha to stay alert before crawling up to the edge of the cell.
As I had expected, Renge came strolling in soon after. She walked up and bent down to my level, causing her skirt to spread out across the ground.
“You’ll have to forgive me for that,” she said, smiling right in my face with a cute little head twirl.
At least she didn’t straight out say, “We’re still cool, right?” so I could at least appreciate that. I smiled bitterly before saying, “Do you need anything from me? Sorry, I really don’t feel like talking in this state.”
Renge stood up with a smug smile and walked to Asuha’s cell. She crouched down a bit to stare at her right in the face, just like she did with me.

However, unlike me Asuha was also tied to a chair, so Renge didn't have to bend too far down.
"You're a very strong candidate for future elections, so I want you to help me out. Agree to that, and I'll let you out."
Asuha stared back without so much saying a word.
That silence seemed to trigger Renge, but she giggled to cover it up. Perhaps she wasn't used to being ignored like that.
"Umm… Do you hate me right now?"
"Maybe, maybe not," Asuha replied, clearly irritated at having to even speak to her. "I never cared about you enough to know."
Suddenly, Asuha's eyes narrowed. "But seeing you all up in my face like that really pisses me off."
If Asuha wasn't confined to her chair, I would imagine she would leap out at the bar like a caged circus beast. Even her eyes were threatening and bloodthirsty, though Renge remained unfazed.
"I see, so that was it," she said. "You'll have to believe me when I say I didn't mean to come off like that, but that's what ticks you off, huh…"
Renge giggled and fidgeted with her hair before continuing. "You know Kasumi, you really should have fallen for me first, but you were unexpectedly stubborn. I thought it would be easy, I mean, did you not find my clumsiness cute? Or even all the embarrassing things I said? And not even my cute outfits?"
She walked back and leaned in on my cell, gently touching my cheek. She was so close her head was pushing up against the metal bars, but with my straitjacket it was physically hard for me to move away.
"Hey, doesn't your heart just go crazy when you smell the sweet, sugary scent of a woman's perfume?" she said, speaking directly into my ear.
I could feel her warm breath once again against my face as she spoke. I looked straight into her enchanting eyes, and from my peripheral vision I could see that her black hair seemed to spread out and trap me in like the night sky. Her words, as alluring as they were, went directly into my head and my mind went wild as a result.
My body trembled similar to how it did from the side affects of trying to control my [World]. Shivers went up and down from my spine to my head.
"I guess you really don't need to bring your [World] out for guys," I said. "But your [World] affects both guys and girls, right?"
Renge's eyes widened with joy. "Exactly! I told you before, remember?"
She did say something along the lines that things seem to like her when she brought out her [World], but at that time I thought it was limited to plants only. Looking back at it now, everyone always seemed to like her, not to mention the phenomenon that just occurred back at the debate.
"What a frightening power… you're basically brainwashing people," I said. "So why did you end up in the manufacturing branch?"
It wasn't like I thought she was better suited for the military with that power. No, with that power, she could have taken over the military entirely.

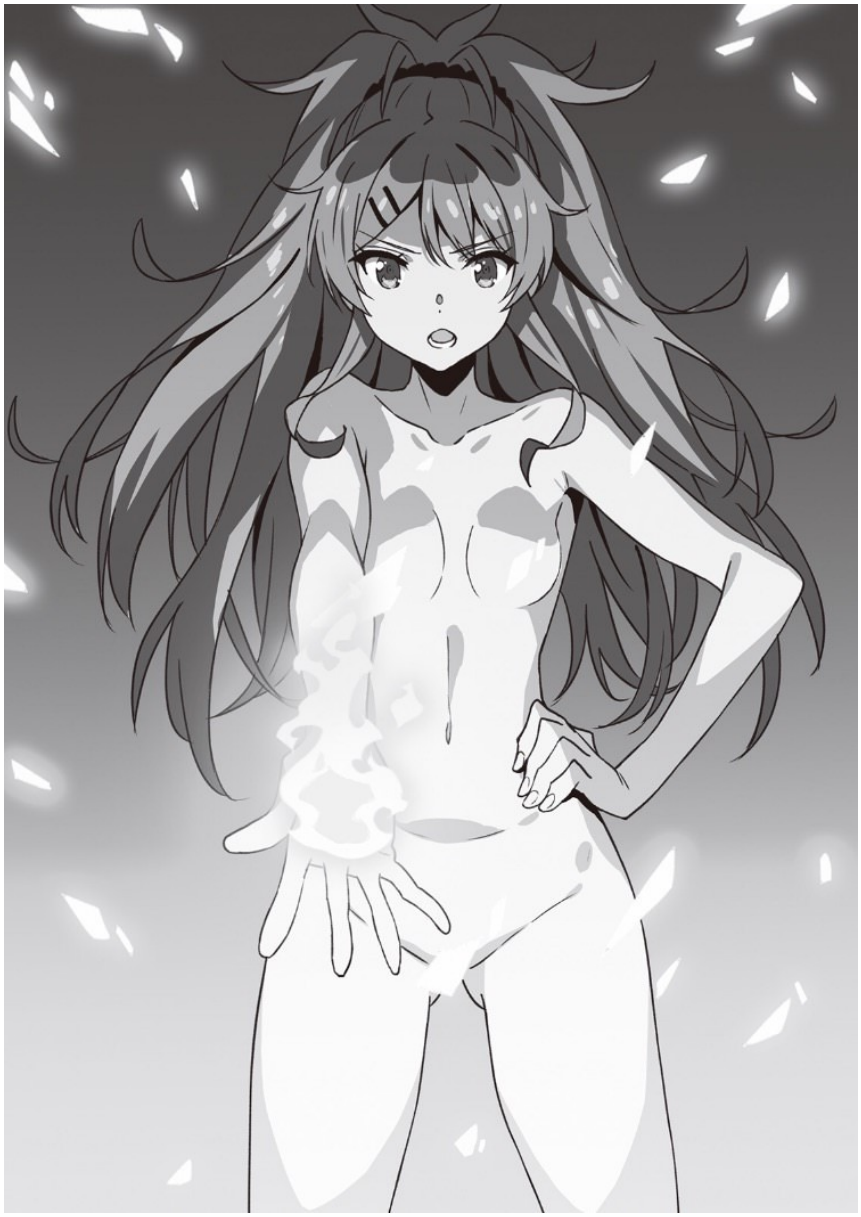
“It’s not as good a power as you think,” she replied with a cold smile, “so I got transferred. It’s not guaranteed that people will follow my orders, especially if the orders were way out of line. I just rearrange some things in their minds to try to make it happen.”
Renge had a bitter look on her face when she said that. If her [World] wasn’t as strong as I thought, then perhaps she found something in the manufacturing branch to strengthen its power enough to affect humans.
“I see, so you were finding out ways to make it more effective here…” I said. “I thought you didn’t know medicine at all, though.”
Renge chuckled. “Herbs aren’t medicine, so technically its true.”
There were plenty of drugs and hallucinogens that could be grown naturally. She could have used marijuana, shrooms, or even different types of herbs to put her victims into a high that could then be abused by her [World].
There was no way of telling how much of them Asagao and I had ingested on a daily basis, or even how much the audience had during the debate. It was certainly a frightening thought.
“Speaking of which,” said Renge, deep in thought. “Why doesn’t it work on you? It’s working fine for everyone else…”
“You don’t know anything, don’t you?” interrupted Asuha. “Of course it won’t work on him.”
Renge turned to Asuha. She had no idea what Asuha was trying to say.
“Why do you think my brother’s so weak?” boasted Asuha. She spoke in a braggart tone meant to get on her nerves.
“What does that have to do with anything? Tell me now, since you brought it up,” demanded Renge.
She was a bit irritated, seeing that she ordered Asuha around as if she was royalty. I guess she might as well be with her [World].
“It’s nothing much…” I said. “My body has a habit of preventing [Worlds] from affecting my mind. Of course it includes mine, but also other [Worlds] as well… including yours. That’s why I’m still me.”
I ran my mouth off before Renge had a chance to do anything to Asuha.
“Wow,” she said amazed. “Then you’re actually as strong as Asuha?”
“I wish I was. I have no idea how to utilize this perk, so I can’t really do anything else with it. Pretty useless, huh.”
“That’s not true!” said Renge. She sounded like she was comforting me after my own self-deprecating statements. You’re plenty useful, like being Asuha’s precious brother, and… hmm… As I thought, I really can’t let you go.”
She took out a pistol and pointed it straight at me.
Asuha’s eyes narrowed. “What? You trying to threaten us? Take him hostage?”
“Well, what else can I do?” said Renge. “Since he’s not affected by my [World].”

“Don’t…” pleaded Asuha. Her face turned pale with a combination of fear and anger. “What’s wrong with you?”
Renge sighed and turned back to me. “What’s wrong with me…? What’s wrong with this world? Everyone’s always fighting… and because of my [World], I lost the place where I belonged, but without it no one’s ever going to like me! That’s why I can’t let—”
Before Renge could finish up her sentence, a strange cracking noise drowned her voice out. It was odd enough that she frantically tried to look around for what caused it until she suddenly stopped in her tracks.
Asuha had her head down right in front of her, but a faint white light started to surge through her body. That light caused her straitjacket to rapidly heat up and cool down, greatly reducing its binding strength. Even the chair, floor, and walls around her started to crack from her power.
“Sorry, but I have to say this now,” said Asuha. The light that enveloped her bursted into blue flames that went wild around her. “I’m going to kill you.”
“If you kill me, it’ll be the end of Chiba. I caused this, so I’m the only one who can fix it. If Chiba falls, so will the other cities, and soon the world with it…” Renge said softly. The cracks on the wall brought in the wind which gently blew on her hair, but she didn’t react to it at all.
Instead, a slight chuckle could be heard from the flames. “Hey, did you hear that? She’s hilarious,” laughed Asuha. Having burned off her straitjacket, she emerged from the flames completely naked with bits of light scattered around her.
“Yeah, she really is,” I replied.
We didn’t have to say anything else, as even Renge had to have known what was coming. Even so, Asuha and I couldn’t help but say the same thing.
“We really don’t care about this world.”
*
Before falling into the cold sleep, I saw nothing but a flame in my dreams.
“Don’t cry,” it seemed to say. “Everything’s going to be alright.”
My voice drowned out and my body drifted away, but even though I couldn’t hear or even see it, I could feel its warmth.
It wasn’t long before the flame started to fade away into the coldness, and me along with it.
“Even if I were to succumb to the cold,” I thought, “let me at least bring the warmth back to this flame.”
At that moment, the coldness took over, and the world came to a standstill as space and time froze over.
Within that, I longed for the flame. I wanted to let it know I was here, but I didn’t know how to put it into words— I was never good at that sort of thing.
And that’s how my [World] came to be. It was there to remind me of the flame and to warm it up back again. No matter how vague my memories may become, my [World] was there to bring me the warmth that the flame once brought to me. It was there to keep the flame burning for eternity.

As long as I had that flame, as long as I had him, I didn’t need anything else.
He was the only thing that mattered to me.
That’s why I can say this with confidence:
I really don’t care about this world.

Chapter 5: For All The Wrong Reasons

The walls around Asuha boiled when she brought out her flame, but they froze soon after when she turned that flame into ice. As a result, they crumbled under her immense power, leaving dust and vapor in their wake.
“Asuha! Asuha!” I called out. It was hard to see anything with all the debris in the air.
“Yeah, yeah, I’m here,” she replied playfully.
The whole building came crashing down before I knew it, sending a shockwave that threw me around like a rag doll. Luckily, Asuha jumped up and stopped me from being thrown around too much.
“Hey, you alright? Hold on a sec, I’ll get these off of you,” she said before carefully burning off my straitjacket.
“T-Thanks Asuha,” I said. It felt good to be able to freely move again.



Asuha was close enough that I could see her face even through all the dust. I appreciated her breaking me out, but maybe she went a little too far in destroying the jail. Not only were the walls around us completely reduced to debris, the buildings even further out were starting to collapse from the pressure as well.

Renge and her crew quickly scrambled out of the area. I couldn't see them leave, but I heard their frantic footsteps loud and clear.

As they left, I could hear someone crying out in confusion a few cells down from us. "What's happening?!?!? What is it now?? Get me out of here!" she yelled out.

"Asagao, calm down. I don't know what's going on either, but it's best to stay calm."

No doubt they were Asagao and Natsume. From the sound of their voices they were still shaken up, but at least they were okay. I could breathe a sigh of relief to that.
However, I quickly realized there was something more important that I should be focusing on. I grabbed both of Asuha's shoulders and pulled her close to me. "Hey, you alright?" I said. "You're not hurt anywhere are you?"
"W-What's with this all of a sudden? I-I'm fine…" she murmured back, her face slightly turning red. She swatted both my hands away before quickly turning away from me, exposing her completely naked back to me.
It was only then did I realize she didn't have any clothes on… I grabbed what was left of a nearby straitjacket, handed it to her, and turned around to respect her privacy.
"Thanks…" she whispered softly. She rummaged through the scraps and tried to make herself an outfit.
I breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad you're fine. You seemed to be pushing pretty hard especially since you don't have your specialized weapon… I was pretty worried."
"Well, the weapon only helps me control it…" she replied. "I can control weak powers just fine, but after that, I get so tired I don't even want to move anymore. So maybe I do wish I had my weapon…"
Asuha said that like it was no big deal, but I of all people knew how much she was putting up a front. What she did must have put a huge strain on her body no matter how talented she was.
In any case, I had nothing else to worry about as long as she was fine, although there was no way I was going to let her do anything more in that condition.
"Alright, how's this look?" said Asuha.
I turned around and saw that she had made a makeshift outfit from the straitjacket with even a jacket to wear on the outside.
"Wow, looking good… *and* cute."
"Ew, don't say that," pouted Asuha with her cheeks again blushing a little bit. "Let's just get out of here."
"Alright, let's go. Wait, let's get Asagao and the rest first."
We couldn't just leave Asagao like that. She had probably been taken hostage so that Renge could get Natsume under control, so before they came back, we needed to get them out.
We made our way even further in the compound where the two were being held, and saw that they were tied up in straitjackets like we were. Once they saw us, the two breathed a sigh of relief.
Their cages were already weakened from what Asuha did earlier, so she just casually broke the metal bars open.
"Kasumi, what's going on?!?" asked Asagao. "I just don't understand anymore…"
"We got played, no doubt. Sorry, there's no time to explain… We gotta go," I said, breaking her free of the straitjacket.

Asuha did the same with Natsume, and together the four of us made our way out, all while I briefly went over my conversation with Renge.
“I don’t know what to say to that… She’s more amazing than I thought she was,” Asagao whispered in shock after hearing what I had to say.
“Amazing, you say?” I replied back. “Are you still under the effects of her [World]?”
Natsume tapped me on the shoulder and said, “I don’t think any of us are under her control. She probably has to continuously talk to maintain her [World] on us since it doesn’t seem to have a lasting effect. That’s probably why she has to stick with her underlings, and because of that, she hasn’t talked to us in a while. So we should be fine now.”
“Yeah, and we haven’t had her tea in a while too,” added Asagao.
As I expected, the tea and medicine given by Renge was used to speed up the otherwise lengthy process it would take to brainwash us.
“I was only speaking from an objective point of view earlier,” Asagao continued. “Her idiot ideals aside, she possesses an especially powerful [World], not to mention her skill at developing new things… Looking back at it now, I guess I failed as her boss.”
“Don’t talk to me about failed bosses… It hits me too hard,” said Natsume.
Asagao shrugged her shoulders. “Yeah, you’re not wrong about that.”
The two looked at each other and laughed.
“Hey, aren’t they getting along quite well?” Asuha whispered in my ear after eyeing them from the side. “Did they suddenly become friends?”
“Originally they were,” I replied.
Asuha looked at me funny. From her point of view, the two certainly seemed to have become friends just like that. However, as Asagao had stated before, the two spent time together like a family. That’s why it was no surprise that they continued to behave like siblings even now.
As we almost made our way out of the facility, a loud groan came crashing down on us.
“Chigusa… Asagao… Chigusa…” it cried out. “It’s dark and I’m alone…”
With a stroke of luck we just happened to pass by Urushibara, who at the moment was crouched over in a cell corner.
“Ah, it’s Urushibara,” said Asagao. “Kasumi, get him out too.”
Hearing him call my name twice gave me the shivers. It creeped me out so much I didn’t even want to break him out, but if Asagao told me so then I had no choice.
I motioned to Asuha to break the door, but before she could cut off his straitjacket, Urushibara came rolling up to me.
“Hey what the hell man!” he shouted. “What took you so long?”
“Urushibara, we’re gonna stop Renge,” interrupted Asagao. “I need your help.”
Upon hearing that, he immediately stopped shouting and smirked. “I’ve been waiting for you to say that all this time,” he said reassuringly.

He actually sounded pretty cool if not for his sudden quick change in attitude and the fact that he was still tied up.
—
We swiftly hid around the city right after breaking out. Urushibara snuck around to gather info, and when he came back to us he immediately took a knee in front of Asagao.
“Urushibara,” she said. “Give me your report.”
“Of course! The city right now is actually not in disarray. People are shaken up, but they seem to be on the watch for now. It seems like Renge’s group hasn’t gone full blown revolution yet.”
Asagao crossed her arms and nodded, but Natsume was feeling a bit worried.
“What about my right hand woman and all the other military people?” she asked softly.
“She and along with all the other people who refused to cooperate were thrown in a cell. A lot of the military members are held in a different complex than where we just were and given some sort of drug to force them to sleep. It shouldn’t be too hard for them to bust themselves out, but who knows when they’ll wake up.”
“What’s Renge up to, then?” asked Asagao.
“She dispatched some squads to take care of some loose ends, but for the most part she’s gathered with all the other students, probably either making sure she’s still got control over them or maybe even strengthening her powers. I have reason to believe she’s going to make her move soon… especially since the actual voting for the election is coming up. It’s only a matter of time before she gets what she wants and that will be the end of us.”
“I see… that’s a very systematic approach to taking over the city, but effective. She’s even taken care of the military… Is there any way to stop her?” she replied.
Both Asagao and Natsume looked quite troubled while Asuha just looked confused. As for me, I probably looked troubled and confused, but I called for their attention.
“Umm, can I ask a question here? How did Urushibara find all that out?” I asked, with Asuha nodding in agreement next to me.
Urushibara grinned. “I told you, I was also in the military. You were in the sniper unit, but I was working for their intelligence. No matter what place I’m in, I can always blend in and get information out. Well, maybe not if I’m left alone in a dark place…”
Wow, he didn’t have to bring that up.
But it was true, Urushibara seemed like the type of person to have done everything after being sent in so many places.
“Even within the military, the intelligence unit operates away from everyone else,” Natsume chimed in. “It’s not just you, but most of the other students

don’t know Urshibara’s powers. Because of that, he was picked on all the time… so for that I apologize…”
Urushibara shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. It’s better for me if they all look down on me, since it’s easier to do my job. People aren’t on guard if they don’t consider me a threat, and they just can’t help spilling a bunch of secrets to show off.”
Very impressive Urushibara, I might have some newfound respect for you…
“That’s why I said we needed his power,” boasted Asagao. “Though even if we have all this info, there’s not a whole lot we can do with it…”
She sighed upon realizing what she just said.
“I hate to say this, but there’s always the option of just doing what they say since I doubt they’re willing to kill us,” said Ursuhibara. “Alternatively, we can go to Tokyo or Kanagawa. With our skill set, I’m sure we’ll be a welcome sight.”
Asuha smirked. “That’s funny… There’s no way my brother can get along with any of them.”
“The same could somewhat be said with him and this city,” Asagao replied unsarcastically.
They were saying some pretty terrible things about me, but I simply brushed it off. However, I couldn’t say the same for Urushibara’s suggestions. If we followed any of those paths, we would be deviating from the only thing I ever wanted. Asuha would still be an elite in those cities, so she could still go inland as planned, but it would be a completely different story for me. Right now, Chiba was my pathway to go inland with Asuha so I could take care of her for the rest of my life. After all, I did promise her that, and I didn’t intend on breaking that promise anytime soon.
Similarly, if we gave ourselves up to Renge, I would be nothing more but a hostage that dragged Asuha down, so of course I wouldn’t want that as well. She needed to live a life without anybody holding her back.
As a result, there was only one thing I could say in response.
“Sorry, but I’m opposed to all those options,” I said. I had to gather myself before saying the next few words. “I guess I like Chiba too much.”
Everyone else froze upon hearing that, but soon they all burst out laughing.
“Yeah, true. I love Chiba too! It’s the best,” Asagao said, trying to do her best idol impression.
Natsume couldn’t help but smile as well as she playfully poked Asagao on the forehead, causing her to pout in the other direction. Urushibara, watching the two from the side, wondered what he had done to deserve seeing them act like this.
Asuha was laughing the hardest among them all. “Oh my god, this is hilarious,” she said, tearing up from laughing so hard. “Alright then, it’s settled. We gotta make Chiba proud.”
“Oh, make Chiba proud? How?” I asked.
“We simply beat them up until they understand.”
“That’s more of making Kanagawa proud, though…”

“Exactly, I agree with Asuha!” laughed Natsume. She jammed both her fists together to show that she was serious. “If we can’t show them whose boss, we can’t win.”
I didn’t know why I was so surprised that they said that, but I guess they really were just muscleheads after all. It seemed Asuha wasn’t the only one wanting to crush them with violence, but Asagao was hesitant to get on board as well.
“Seriously, stop thinking with you fists,” she said with a sigh. “You beat them up, then what? Have you two thought that far?”
“Even if we were able to take Renge down,” Asagao continued, “There’s no way either Nasume or me could become the head anymore. We simply won’t get the votes. And if some random person becomes the head, our situation wouldn’t change. The city would just still be as messed up, and all the progress we’ve made would be for naught.”
Asagao wasn’t wrong. It wasn’t a matter of whether they were in the right or not, what mattered was that no one else trusted them anymore. Their reputation had been torn to shreds, so there had to be another one among us to step up. This election was going to be the defining point between the military and all the other branches, so we also needed a head that could resolve things amicably.
“In other words, we need to throw out a new candidate, right?”
Asagao nodded. “It’s still troublesome… I guess Kasumi’s the best shot we got,” she said with a big sigh before scratching her head in defeat. “With Natsume and me under him, he’s got all the tools needed to take down Renge.”
“Huh?” Asuha and I shouted at the same time.
“Picturing my brother as a head is actually too hilarious to imagine,” chuckled Asuha.
“Seriously. Me? I was taken along with you all, you know? I’m gonna be treated as a criminal too.”
“But like Renge, you were also transferred to my branch. If we can keep the parallel between Renge and you, then people might start question Renge’s claim to becoming the head. The city might start to be hesitant to accept her.”
“Alright, *now* it’s decided,” said Natsume. “We’ll do a raid on Renge’s little assembly, so we can actually show them who the real bosses are.”
We do have everything we needed to take her down, just as Asagao had said, and this was an opportunity we couldn’t pass on. Hesitating now would mean nothing but Renge’s victory.
“Alright, I got it. I will… try,” I said. I couldn’t think of anything else to say but that.
Hearing that, Asuha rushed up to me. “What?? You as the head?” she said, frantically pulling at my sleeve. “But… doesn’t that mean you’ll have to fight? You’re super weak right? It won’t work out!”

“I’ll manage, it’ll be fine,” I replied with a smile. “There’s a lot of people I can depend on… after I ask them. Be right back.”
I spoke lightheartedly to put her more at ease, but as I left I could hear her go, “I’m saying you can’t just *manage* through this..” behind me.
I called over Urushibara away from the rest of the pack since I wanted to speak to him alone.
“What?” he eyed me suspiciously. “You’ve got some guts calling me out here, Mr. candidate.”
He laughed, but it was one of those weird laughs where I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not. Oh well, I just shrugged it off.
“Sorry,” I whispered into his ear. “I just got something I needed to discuss with you…”
I took the time to explain everything.
When I finished, Urushibara didn’t know what to say. He took off his glasses to rub his eyebrows, and with a grunt he said, “Chigusa… heh.” He smiled so brightly that he actually seemed dependable for once.
This was a day I thought would never come, yet here we were.
—
Honestly speaking, Urushibara was actually quite dependable. At first I thought he was just a tanned, scar-ridden gangster, but he always managed to be useful no matter what the situation was. In this case, his scouting was on point, and he even had the time to grab a spare uniform for Asuha. Furthermore, he was able to secretly lead us to Renge’s meeting place thanks to a route he found while he scouted around.
When we got there, we noticed about fifty of Renge’s group of transfers along with some other students patrolling the area with all their specialized weapons in hand. I guess Renge really didn’t want us to interfere. We quickly hid on the side and discussed our game plan.
“We probably have to get through them to go in, so to help with that I brought these,” said Urushibara, pulling out four specialized handguns from his bag.
Urushibara had once again surprised me to have even thought this far. At this point he wasn’t just an intelligence officer, but the whole branch with how much support he was giving us.
“I almost couldn’t get these with how much the whole area was on lock down… but we’d need to rely on these for our main firepower… It’ll be only us four fighting…”
Urushibara bit down on his lip in frustration, but to me he had done plenty already. It was true that it would still be an uphill battle even with these, especially since no one expected Asagao to fight.
“Sorry, I really wish I could fight alongside you all…” said Asagao, realizing what was going on.
“It’s okay, I’ll make up your portion in battle, too!” reassured Natsume. She gently patted Asagao on the shoulder before grabbing a handgun and inspecting it carefully. “This is quite the old, generic model, and it’s hard to

use this with our [Worlds], so it'll be hard to do any damage with these. But it's plenty. It should be good enough to overpower them."
"On paper the range on this is about 50 meters, but in reality it's about just 10," noted Urushibara. "Of course it also depends on how well you can use it."
I was sure he was being informative, but I wasn't paying attention to him at all. Instead, I went ahead and grabbed myself a handgun as well. After I took mine, Asuha quickly snatched up the remaining two.
"Alright, I'll be in the front," she said. "You guys cover me."
If it wasn't for me frantically pulling her back, she would have taken off by now. "What? No, no, you can't do that. You already spent way too much energy earlier, so why not just let Natsume handle the front?"
Asuha groaned. "It's because of you that I'm like this… I'm used to this, so just be quiet and watch me," she said as she waved me off. She was done talking to me.
There were loads of things I wanted to say in response, but I didn't want to jeopardize the operation just because of our little quarrel, so I took a moment to compose myself. It was true that Asuha was better suited to be the vanguard since Natsume had more firepower but at a longer cooldown, so I guess she was right.
"Alright," I finally said. "Good luck, Asuha."
"Sure. Just don't get in my way and it's all good," she replied without even looking in my direction.
I felt a small wave of relief as I turned back to Natsume. "So that means Natsume will be protecting Asagao, then. Just provide some covering fire from time to time."
"Got it. Leave her to me," she said with a smile.
Asagao got emotional hearing her say that. At the very least, with this she wouldn't be taken as a hostage. What's left was to make sure the plan goes smoothly.
"I'll be sniping around, and Urushibara, once you get inside, you know what to do, right?"
"Me? Oh yeah, leave it to me," he replied.
I was glad I didn't have to explain everything again for him. What a reliable person.
And with that, our little strategy huddle was over. I didn't feel like we actually decided on anything, but oh well. It was time to begin the operation.
"Alright, Asuha, go for it."
"Yes sir!" she said, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. She couldn't help but smirk before heading off.
Once she was gone, I hid myself under the cover of the shadows. I suppressed my feelings of restlessness by constantly reminding myself that it was up to me to make the right shots, and to do that I had to stay calm and wait.

On the other hand, Asuha went wild with her acrobatics. She immediately rained down a volley of bullets at the enemy who couldn't react properly in time. She continued to be relentless in her barrage, but there was only so much she could do as a single fighter even though she didn't give them any time to recover from her attacks. As time went on, the enemy was able to slowly circle around her through their numbers alone before she had a chance to stop them.
Now, at the center of the enemy formation, Asuha was growing tired from a mix of fatigue and her dwindling power. There were just too many people that she had to handle. Even worse, Asuha was trying really hard not to kill them with her aim, which only gave them even more of a handicap.
Once the enemy got her surrounded, they started to fire multiple warning shots at her feet. Asuha was clearly getting frustrated, so it was up to me to support her. I could tell that she was too reckless in her movements and that was made worse by the fact that she wasn't paying attention to her stamina. It was only a matter of time before her haphazard way of fighting led to her demise.
That was why I had to focus on her and her movements. Despite the massive scale of her [World], my [World] was to help her and her alone. It enabled me to be the only one who could read her movements and do something about it. No matter where her enemies were coming from, my duty was to shoot every single one of them down.
And that's what I did. I cocked my gun, listened to their movements, and shot… again, and again. I shot their arms, legs, and even the guns they were holding. Some shots put them down quietly, but some others were hit so hard they were knocked off balance and went down screaming.
In the very front, Asuha stopped what she was doing and turned back in my direction. "What are you doing?!!?" she screamed back at me. "I told you not to get in my way!"
"Well I told you I was gonna cover for you!" I screamed back.
Through all the gunfire, through all the explosions, through all the shouts and screams of the people around her, the only voices that really pierced through everything else belonged to us two.
But that was the extent of our conversation. Asuha continued her indiscriminate barrage and I continued my extremely precise shots to the people around her. I vowed to make sure that there would not be a single person who could get to her today.
"There's a sniper out there! Get to cover!!" someone finally shouted. In an instant, everyone stopped what they were doing and immediately tried searching for me. The fear of getting shot compelled them to quickly take cover and hide, even more so when they could have thought there were multiple snipers.
We immediately took advantage of that opening and forced our way into the building.
—

Renge looked beautiful as usual on the stage even from afar. Well, I actually wasn't that far away from her, as a quick sprint would be more than enough to reach her. However, she just *felt* like she was so far away, almost unreachable. She felt as out of reach as a horizon off in the distance, a faraway star in the night sky, or even an idol on stage.
Speaking of which, this place would be perfect to have a performance. It was tall enough to have three seating floors and spacious enough to seat thousands of people. I was hidden in the third floor, but I could see that there was already that amount of people inside.
I could also faintly hear the gunshots outside, which inevitably made the people inside nervous. They began to nervously whisper among themselves, but thousands of people whispering at once caused quite the commotion. They looked at each other in panic before turning to Renge up front. However, she was completely unfazed and went along with her speech as if nothing had happened. "I will become the head of Chiba," she stated. "But even if you don't support me, I'll still reach out my hand to you."
Renge's goons were all lined up right behind her with their heads held high. They didn't seem one bit concerned about what was going on outside. I even saw the person who shoved a gun in my head earlier.
The audience loved her speech. They cheered and gave her a round of applause, exactly how they responded to her in the debate. Once again, Renge's [World] seemed to put the audience in a fanatic trance.
At that moment, I heard Urushibara go, "The control room has been secured. I repeat, the control room has been secured" into the headset I had been wearing. I tapped into my mic to confirm that I had received his message and got ready to finally end this by popping another pill into my mouth.
Immediately, I was dragged straight into the all to familiar feeling of having thousands of voices surge right into me where I was on the verge of passing out. Luckily, the bitterness of the pill in my mouth put my conscious back in check, and because of that I was somehow able to endure the pain.
I tapped into my microphone three more times where I was instantly greeted with an okay from Urushibara, or at least I thought that was from him. At this point, I was too deep in the voices of all the people around me that I couldn't really tell.
"Renge, it's checkmate," I said. "You're done."
Renge abruptly stopped her speech the moment she heard me. "Wow, it's your voice, Kasumi!" she said, speaking joyfully as if it was just another day at the office. "But where are you?"
She giggled in a way that seemed much louder and closer than before… perhaps I was more inclined to listen to her now that she sounded like her usual cute self. I focused on her voice through all the chattering in the arena. Her suddenly jump to cheerfulness really got the crowd going.
"I'm not done— I've just begun, and…" she whispered off the mic.

While she was speaking, I felt a chill in the back of my head as I processed all the voices going through it. It scratched at my brain so painfully that I couldn't wait another minute. I had to pull the trigger.

No, it's over.

This gun was supposedly made to hit targets up to 50 meters, but the bullet itself can fly as far as 200 meters. Because of that, with the right information and skills, it was possible to hit targets at that distance.

The bullet went straight into the leg of a boy standing by her side, causing blood to splash onto Renge's face, though she continued to stay relatively unfazed. On the other hand, the boy immediately dropped to the floor and gave a scream so loud it shook the audience to their very cores. Some couldn't stay composed from hearing his scream and screamed out just as loud.

The sudden jump in sound intensity obviously did not go unnoticed by me. Just as I thought I had a grasp on all the sounds in the area, their screams once again put me on the brink of passing out. Luckily, I managed to force my trembling hand to throw another pill into my mouth.

It was unlikely that he was going to die since I didn't hit him in a fatal spot, but with all the pain he was feeling he probably thought he was going to. The audience as well probably had the same sentiment from his screams. If Renge could bring out her [World] to control them, then I needed to have them act on their primal instincts by making them fear for their lives. An individual may be very strong mentally, but as a group it was easy to break them down.

"Actually, I'll say it this way…" I said again through the speaker. "Renge, I will end this myself."

"Ah, I see… that's amazing," she said, speaking with a darker tone this time around. "I guess it really was you. This all wouldn't have happened if only you went along with me that time… if only you grabbed my hand… if only you were there for me…"

She spoke solemnly, envisioning why things ended up this way and what would happen if things had been different.

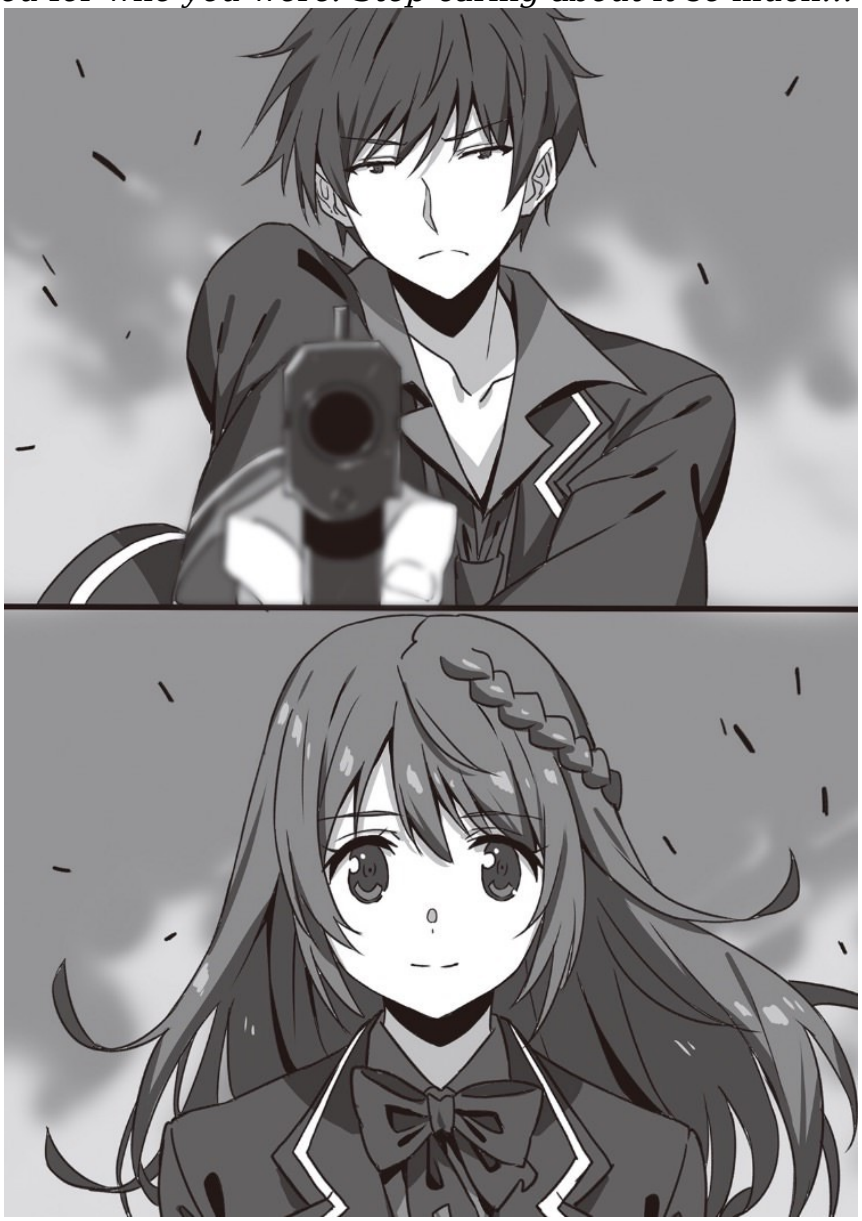
She opened both her arms to me and said, "I guess that doesn't matter now, though. Please do it… End it…"

If we had been in her dream, I probably would have been right there for her on that stage. Unfortunately, this was reality, so I had no choice but to pull the trigger instead.

The bullet headed straight to her chest, but I wasn't trying to kill her. Instead, I hit the atomizer she hung around her neck, instantly breaking it into little pieces. With her specialized weapon now gone, Renge's power went out of her control and vaporized with a blinding purple light.

The audience that was once under her control instantly lost control of their senses as a result, so they weren't able to process her screams. In fact, I could confidently say that I was the only one who saw her collapsed body on stage and the only one who could hear her whispers.

You didn’t need your [World] to make people like you. They already liked you for who you were. Stop caring about it so much…



That’s why I should be the one to step up to her. I headed up to the stage as if I was the one to rescue the tragic heroine that she had become. Once on the podium, I almost collapsed before reaching for the mic. At this point, I was feeling the heavily side effects of bringing out my [World].

I didn’t plan out what I wanted to say even as I stood on the podium, though it didn’t really matter either way. I could have just winged it. That being said, I knew exactly how I wanted to start it off.

“Hello, World. Good morning, Chiba,” I said. Once I had that out of the way, my creative juices began to flow. “Has everyone woken up from their nightmare? No? Well, maybe there’s no point in asking that. I can’t hear you all anyways, so allow me to say the following: We have power. Power to kill

the [Unknowns]… and the power to kill people by starving them all to death or simply by sniping them from afar. Don’t think for one moment that we don’t have the power to control every aspect of your lives and even the power to control your behavior. ”
I paused to cover the fact that I was feeling too nauseous to continue speaking.
“So keep all that in mind. It doesn’t matter what branch you’re in, I’ll always have my sniper aimed at you. I will be the one to decide if I want to pull the trigger or not, which makes me undeniably the most powerful person in Chiba. If you got a problem with that, bring it to me. You know where I am, and I’ll be waiting for you.”
I cut off the mic. It was a miracle that I was even able to say all that, but it looks like I was at my limit. What’s left was for Asagao or Natsume to end this farce by taking me down one way or another. Hopefully Urushibara had managed to get them in as we discussed. After that, my work here would be done.
A long silence followed
— it felt like an eternity, but it could have just been a second. A moment of silence could feel ten times longer than it actually was. It always had that kind of effect on time perception.
Despite that, I clearly heard footsteps. They were the some of the angriest footsteps I had ever heard. And they belonged to Asuha.
Why you?
Asuha walked up to the podium in silence and forcibly knocked me off onto the cold, hard floor. Sure it was painful, but I was actually relieved that I could finally lay down. Although losing consciousness by the second, I laid there as I looked up to Asuha on the mic.
“There. I’m number one now. I’m the head. If you got a problem with that, come at me,” she declared.
I passed out before I could see what happened next.
—
I wondered how many times I had peered into the world from the darkness. Even though I couldn’t speak to it, I could hear its sound going through me. Even though I couldn’t see it, I could feel its heat radiating onto me.
And just like that, I emerged into the world once again. In this case, the sound came from a trembling voice near me and the heat came from the blankets that were draped over me.
Asuha buried her head into my chest as I woke up. “You really are so stupid,” I heard her say.
The moon was bright enough for me to get a clear look at her.
“Why did you have to do that? You were such an idiot, it made me so angry!”
“…”
Tears started to well up in her eyes as she glared at me. “Next time you do that, I’ll actually kill you.”

“Don’t worry. That was the last time,” I said confidently. I gently wiped the tears away from her eyes.
“Because if I kill you, you won’t do it any more.”
“I sure won’t.”
“Besides, I’m strong,” she said, this time playfully hitting my chest a few times and grabbing my collar. “I could have done it myself.”
I gently grabbed onto her hand and said, “I can’t deny that.”
“So I was supposed to be the one to end Renge. Why did you have to do it? Don’t you hate working?”
“There are things I hate more than just working. I had to do it.”
“Same here.”
“I guess that’s true for everyone.”
“Yeah! There’s a bunch of other things I hate. Like my brother, you know?”
“Don’t say that please…”
She always did say the most ridiculous things, but right now I was just glad to be talking to her. It didn’t matter what we were talking about, I only treasured the fact that we were together at this very moment.
I selfishly thought to myself that I understood her feelings just by being with her. She didn’t need to tell me anything at all, but since she did, I would be happy to listen to her all day.
The day when she could say the same for me couldn’t come soon enough. It would be the day when she could truly understand my feelings.
*
Before falling into the cold sleep, I heard nothing but a voice in my dreams.
“Don’t cry,” I said to it. “Everything’s going to be alright.”
Who was I trying to speak to? I closed my eyes and tried to hear it out. I could tell it belonged to a child, but I didn’t know exactly who it was.
However, the voice brought me a warmth that I still remember to this day. Even with nothing but darkness around me, it became the source of my hope.
It wasn’t long before the voice started to fade away, and me along with it. At that moment, the coldness took over, and the world came to a standstill as space and time froze over.
Within that, I longed for the voice. I didn’t care what the voice was saying or who it was speaking to. I just wanted to know if it was there. Once I heard it, I could feel its warmth once again.
And that’s how my [World] came to be. It was there to understand what the voice was really saying. Whether it was crying out in happiness or sadness, my [World] was there to always hear what it had to say. No matter how much time had passed, my [World] was there as a reminder of what was truly important to me.
As long as I could hear her voice, as long as she was there, I didn’t need anything else. She was the only thing that mattered to me.
That’s what I can say this with confidence:
I really don’t care about this world.

Epilogue: To Return Home One Day

With a new city head came new staff, but it was almost shocking how quickly everything returned back to normal.
As usual, we continued to work day to day, except this time our workload had once again gone up. Asagao in particular got the short end of the stick. She was not only part of the new city staff, but also continued serving as the manufacturing branch manager. Even worse, her workload was further increased by the antics of another staff member…
“Asagao, here you go!” Natsume said with a smile, as she dropped a stack of papers onto Asagao’s desk. “I found last year’s!”
She seemed so happy to be working alongside Asagao that she couldn’t stop grinning. On the other hand, Asagao did not look one bit happy at all.
“What is this?!?” she shouted after skimming over the papers. “What’s wrong with your old staff? None of these contracts are written properly, and where’s the seals!?”
Her forehead had gotten more wrinkly as she got more angry. Perhaps they were the source of her sharpness and wit.
Natsume winced. “We’re not good with that kind of stuff… Plus the seal is… Uhh, somewhere…”
“Enough! I’ve had it with you! Urushibara, find the seal!”

Urushibara immediately walked in with the seal the moment she said that. He seriously had to be some sort of ninja to be able to find the seal that fast…
I guess I was shocked more than I should have been at Urushibara's ninja skills since I didn't see Asagao throw both the seal and the stack of papers in my direction.
"Kasumi!" she shouted. "You fix it! You're the subhead, so approve it with your seal! And find the head while you're at it!"
Just like old times, huh…
"Umm… you know, I'm not the subhead, so my seal won't mean anything…"
"You *are* the subhead! Who else is gonna control her? It's fine, just do it!"
Asagao ushered me out the room. There were just so many things that were thrown on my plate: last year's contracts, balance sheets, staff quarter applications, Renge's return paperwork, point distribution sheets, overtime reports, new budget requests, and subpoenas from the Administration Bureau.
I quickly stamped through the papers as I wandered around outside, occasionally making changes here and there. Every so often I would also just stare straight up at the sky. The weather was so nice today it lifted my spirits a little.
I wondered where Asuha could have gone in such a fine day like today. Going through the different possibilities in my mind, I suddenly found myself walking right up to the shore.
Luckily, somehow Asuha was nearby, casually lying down with her cell phone.
"Asuha, please do some work…" I said, taking a seat next to her.
Asuha lazily shuffled a bit so she could rest her head on my lap. "Hmm? No way, count me out. I'll give all that to you. You like work, right?"
"I really don't…"
"Heh, that response is so you. You always sound so funny saying that."
"What do you mean that was so me? I'm not some one dimensional cliche single celled organism here… Nor do I intend to be."
"One what?"
Asuha looked straight up at me with a serious yet annoyed gaze. Unable to stand the full brunt of her gaze, I gently stroked her hair to block her from looking at me any more. Her hair felt plenty warm in my hand, almost as if each strand was a small piece of sunlight.
"Eh nevermind," I replied. "Forget I said that."
"Yeah, I probably would have anyway."
"Somehow I don't doubt that… Wait, what are we even talking about? Let's finish our work so we can both go home."
"Well, I'm gonna go home first, so…" said Asuha as she got up. However, she paused for a moment before lying back down.
"Hey wait a second…" I said. "Shouldn't it be natural for us to go home together?"

Asuha looked back up to me and started poking my face. “Should it? Just imagine this: You’re tired from work, and you come home to an already prepared bath and a meal by me.”
“Wow, that sounds awesome.”
“I know, right?” She couldn’t help but giggle. This time, she playfully dragged her finger around my face.
Things were so peaceful that it felt like time came to a standstill, but I knew all too well that the world around us continued to move on.

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